

The New Criterion

March 2002

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Who knew . . .

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Notes & Comments:

March 2002

This way to the egress

Take one part liberal guilt about race, two parts political correctness, and add a large measure of contemporary lit-crit speak about art. Mix well in a macédoine of whatever leftist political clichés are current this week and, presto! out comes Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born political science major turned curator turned art world star du jour. As *The New York Times* recently reported on the cover of its Arts page on February 12 (and then in long follow-up articles in subsequent issues), the thirty-eight-year-old Enwezor was recently tapped to be the artistic director of Documenta, the huge German-based exhibition of international contemporary art that takes place every several years and that opens in June.

The *Times* was ecstatic. Documenta, its reporter wrote, “is to contemporary art what the Olympics are to sports.” If the *Times* reporter had been thinking about rigged juries, ruthless politicking, and the triumph of publicity over achievement, she might have been on to something. But we fear that she intended to praise the Documenta exhibitions by invoking a realm of endeavor where native excellence was everything.

In fact, for as long as anyone can remember the Documenta exhibitions have repre-

sented the triumph of celebrity and politics over art. Under Okwui Enwezor’s stewardship, the subjugation of art to politics is not simply a taken-for-granted background fact, it is the declared *raison d’être* of the exhibition. “I can’t understand how you can sequester art from politics and social upheaval,” Enwezor said. He is very concerned that Documenta not be just “an optical manifestation”—i.e., art that one looks at—but rather “a public sphere where ideas that do not lend themselves easily to optical representation can be articulated”: in plain English, a manifesto. In a series of exhibitions—at the Guggenheim Museum, at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, at the Art Institute of Chicago (where he is an adjunct curator), Enwezor has used art to illustrate what are essentially political sermons. He has no training in art history. But he talks a good line. And these days actually knowing something about art is practically a liability. As one of Enwezor’s colleagues at the Art Institute explains: “Over the last half-century, conventional classifications of art-making, and the attendant practice of an absolutist connoisseurship—having an ‘eye’ in the old-fashioned sense of the world—have become largely irrelevant to the field of contemporary art.”

In other words, “the field of contemporary art” is art in name only. It poaches on the prestige of art—“art” is the glamorous

sugar-coating—but really it is a form of sloganeering. In the run-up to the opening of Documenta, Enwezor is jetting around the world—Vienna, Delhi, St. Lucia, Lagos—to gather “historians, social scientists, anthropologists, writers, filmmakers, artists, and more” in seminars (“platforms,” he calls them) with titles like “Democracy Unrealized” and “Creolite and Creolization.” Dilating on such activities, the cheerleaders at *The New York Times* hail Enwezor’s “fresh intellectual perspective.” But in fact, the politicizing mandate that Enwezor is pushing has long been business as usual in the trendy precincts of academia. (Look, to take just one example, at the career of Rosalind Krauss.) The governing imperative is “Anything but art!” Politics, sex, literary theory, blatant careerism: all of that (“and more,” as the *Times* might say) is on the menu. But not art, never art—at least not art considered *as* art, as something whose immediate claim is (to use Enwezor’s diminishing epithet) “optical.”

Thomas Wagner, writing recently in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* about Enwezor’s transcontinental “platforms,” said just about all that needs to be said when he described them as “a traveling postgraduate course in which a small flock of the initiated doles out politically correct tuition for all those who were not paying attention when cultural studies was on the curriculum. . . . [T]he process is clear: the seminar comes first, the art comes next.” We have only one small emendation: The seminar comes first, second, and twenty-seventh; art really never makes it at all.

What we are witnessing with the rise of figures like Okwui Enwezor is the next stage in the politically-motivated effort to turn art into a form of social activism. It operates primarily by insinuating the principle of egalitarianism into the realm of aesthetic achievement, urging us to judge art not by the standard of artistic excellence but by the standard of social justice. This cannot be done in too bald-faced a manner, however,

because the activity must still be sold to the public as “art.” Otherwise, where would one get the funds to pay for those trips to Vienna, Delhi, St. Lucia? Those exhibitions at the Art Institute, the Guggenheim, and P.S. 1? Therefore an irrelevant scaffolding of “theory” is introduced to rationalize the suppression of aesthetic values in favor of political imperatives. This makes it possible to purvey objects of nugatory artistic value and pretend they are important because they “challenge” or “transgress” traditional ideas about art. It is a mug’s game. But as P. T. Barnum understood long ago, there’s a sucker born every minute. Indeed, we suspect that Barnum would have harbored a grudging admiration for Documenta, the career of Okwui Enwezor, the flacks at *The New York Times*. Considered as an episode in the history of showmanship, it is an impressive feat. Considered as a cultural or artistic event . . . Well, “this way,” as Barnum put it, “to the egress.”

The rewards of radicalism

If there is one thing we know about those 1960s radicals, it is that they were idealists. Maybe they were a bit loopy; maybe they were irresponsible, drug-ingesting hedonists; but at least they were—and, those who are still with us, are—free of that narrow-minded addiction to materialism and middle-class values that have made the United States such a bastion of (horrible thing!) capitalist enterprise.

One of the first bourgeois values that these paragons dispensed with was consistency. “Do I contradict myself?” Walt Whitman famously asked in *Song of Myself* (a title that would work well as a motto for the Sixties generation), “Very well, then, I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” The caring, sharing, unmaterialistic radicals of the 1960s are, to a man, Whitmanesque in their tolerance of contradiction—or, to

call it by an older term, hypocrisy. Remember Allen Ginsberg? The pedophilic, drug-intoxicated pseudo-poet who calumniated Madison Avenue, capitalist “Amerika,” and materialism in one breath and preached peace-love-brotherhood the next? How Whitmanesque that Ginsberg should have received \$980,000 from Stanford University for his papers.

Ginsberg did not live long enough to enjoy that largesse, but perhaps Susan Sontag will be luckier. Sontag has made a career out of hating America and everything it stands for—“mechanized, anxious, television-brainwashed America,” a country that was “founded on genocide,” went on to glory in “lethal” barbarism, and is “inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian.” America, Sontag wrote, “deserves” to have its wealth “taken away” by the Third World. Well, maybe not quite *all* of its wealth. There is, for example, the \$1.1 million that the University of California at Los Angeles just paid for Sontag’s papers. Sontag might elect to donate those funds to the unfortunate Third-World multitudes she has exhibited such ostentatious concern for. Somehow, though, we suspect she would regard that course of action as insufficiently radical, not to say insufficiently Whitmanesque. “America” may “deserve” to have its wealth taken away, but not S. Sontag.

Higher education, Berkeley style

While Stanford and UCLA have been ponying up large sums for the doodles of aging Sixties radicals, the University of California at Berkeley has been keeping the Sixties flame alive. According to a story in the February 15 issue of *The Daily Californian*, a student newspaper, a Women’s Studies course on male sexuality involved such educational activities as writing papers about sexual fantasies, visiting strip clubs, and watching an instructor have sex. “And all the while,” the paper observed, “earning units toward graduation at UC Berkeley.”

Of course, this sort of thing is becoming as common as dirt at college campuses these days, where it takes a sharp eye to distinguish effectively between so-called “sex studies” (good things, because they “challenge the dominant heterosexual paradigm of libidinal yak yak yak”) and plain old pornography (bad because it “reinforces the dominant,” etc.). Still, the folks at Berkeley were rather pushing the envelope. The course in question has been shut down by nervous administrators—such bad publicity! But in a way Women’s Studies 98/198 (the course in question) was only the tip of the iceberg. Reporting on the episode, *The Sacramento Bee* noted that

The courses were offered under the university’s “democratic education” or “de-cal” program, which is sponsored but not funded by the university. They are organized and run by student instructors and can be taken for credit toward graduation. Other such courses are Blackjack, where students are taught how to count cards, and Copwatch, which advises students “how to safely and effectively assert their rights when interacting with police.”

Responding to questions about an alleged “orgy” at a strip club, Christy Kovacs, a Berkeley freshman who got two units for her participation in the course last fall, explained that “It was just a fun, harmless get-together. . . . It was a class bonding experience.” No doubt.

Can this be for real? We wonder. But the deeper question is this: what does it tell us that we really don’t know whether to credit this story or regard it as a parody. It seems to be true. *The Sacramento Bee* is a serious newspaper. But who knows? Given what has happened to our institutions of higher education, it might very well turn out to be the case that one of our premier universities offers class credit for courses in blackjack, lying to the police, and visiting strip clubs to watch one’s instructor have sex. What does that tell us?

Burke & political liberty

by Martin Greenberg

Politics today, though it must deal with the most serious matters, is a great deal lacking in seriousness. This is due partly to a lack of thoughtfulness among politicians: to their inability, or refusal, to appreciate the questions of principle that are always involved, however unacknowledged, in political action. We therefore need a strong (in Coleridge's phrase) clerisy. But our intellectuals, by and large, are not up to the task. Steeped in a utopianism whose origins lie far back in religious dissent, they exhibit an ignorant political romanticism that finds innocence abroad and evil-doing at home. Today's left-wing intellectuals, and the troops of the enlightened who trail after them in public and private life, are not moved by ordinary emotions of fear and anger when their country comes under deadly terrorist attack—they are full of *understanding*. Their moral vainglory would cut the throat of liberty once again, threatening the survival of culture, so as to satisfy the sense of their own virtuousness. How well Edmund Burke understood this, two centuries ago.

"Irish adventurer" is what Burke's detractors called him, with some truth but more malice. He had come from Dublin to London in 1750 at the age of twenty-one to acquire a law degree and then return home. Instead, giving up the law, he stayed on to make his way as a writer. To scribble for a living was to inhabit the lower regions of respectability. Also there were his Roman Catholic mother, sister, and less close kin.

(He himself, following his father, adhered to the Established Church—Anglican—of Ireland.) Far from repudiating these questionable connections, Burke only added to them by marrying the Irish Catholic Jane Nugent.

He wrote *A Vindication of Natural Morality* and *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in the late 1750s. He undertook to write a yearly chronicle of events, the *Annual Register*, his qualification being that he knew so much. Burke always seemed to know more than anybody else about almost any subject and early on attracted notice by his literary endeavors. (He was much admired by his deep-dyed Tory friend Samuel Johnson.) His life took a decisive turn in 1765 when he became private secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham, a high-minded leader of the Whig party. At the end of the year he became a member of Parliament for a pocket borough and was much applauded for his first speeches attacking the vacillating British policies on the American colonies.

Irish-born Burke soon established himself as an eloquent champion of the Whig cause—the Anglican cause which had imported a foreign king and army into England in 1688 to chase the absolutist Roman Catholic James II from the throne. The Glorious Revolution was the work of Whig noblemen who violated legitimacy so as to have a Protestant monarch who would be in sympathy with the feelings of the

people ("people" meaning the small group of the propertied consisting first of all of the great landowning peers, then county gentry, city merchants, and a few others). Because they fought better for James in Ireland than he had fought for himself in England, the Irish Catholics were legally discriminated against. This history (still very present) made for some inner strain in Burke. He never forgot—nor was he allowed to forget—his origins. It was not the only self-division that was to strain his spirit.

Chance may have steered Burke into the Rockingham camp; ambition and conviction kept him there. He was not a Whig by chance. With his Whiggism went an admiration for the Whig aristocratic ideal, with whose embodiments he now became closely engaged. It doesn't seem, however, that he was ever an intimate of those indolent, fox-hunting, many-acred lords; their pleasures, their lives were not his. He was surely dazzled by the grandeur of the Whig magnates—for a while. But clarity, not disabusement, followed familiarity. It is not surprising that the aesthete of the beautiful and the sublime should have responded to the magnificence of the English lords.

Burke's commoner's admiration for the Whig grandees deepened into a profound political sentiment. He had "long considered men of honor and noble reputation," David Bromwich writes in the introduction to his fine anthology of Burke's speeches and letters (Yale, 2000), "as the steadiest resource of liberty, whether the threat to liberty came from the king or from the people. By their habit of reflecting on themselves in a line of succession, and the wish to deserve the pride that belongs to the character of their families, such persons are to be relied on more than any others for public spirit and self-sacrifice."

In a 1771 letter to the Duke of Richmond, Burke wrote that "persons in your station of life ought to have long views. You people of great families and hereditary trusts and fortunes are not like such as I am . . . we are

but annual plants that perish with our season and leave no sort of trace behind.

The antiquity of customs was a sign of their enduring wisdom, not (as with us) of their superannuation. Upon the liberties of the aristocracy rested its independence, out of which grew a great tradition of public service.

You, if you are what you ought to be, are the great oaks that shade a country and perpetuate your benefits from generation to generation." There was some ambiguity, however, in his denominating "you people of great families" as great oaks. Oaklike stability might also be called oaklike stolidity. In the same letter he had written that "men of high birth and great property are rarely as enterprising as others"—as enterprising, for example, as the Jacobins in France, he was to say many years later, as enterprising as Burke himself, you think (and *he* thought).

Burke in his political career until the 1780s was a Whig reformer of the English constitutional monarchy, all his concern being for the constitution and all his criticism being directed at the monarchy. However radical his criticism, he had no wish to alter the foundations of the existing nobiliary-monarchical system, which he accepted without question when young and hotly defended when old. Yet where was his own place in it? The brilliant protégé of a great lord thanks to his talents, he had a position, not a place. Early in his political life he bought an estate he couldn't afford and looked to become a titled lord, the Earl of Beaconsfield. "Burke remained caught," writes J. D. C. Clark in the introduction to his splendid edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, "in the tension between the patrician ethic he sought to

uphold and the claims of talent, which were his title to assimilation into the aristocracy.”

When his much-loved only son died, that long-held ambition died, too. That, and his own approaching death, freed him to assert with less constraint the pride he took in the merit his abilities had earned him. In *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), Burke replied with a crushing force to two whippersnapper peers, obscenely rich enthusiasts of the *philosophes* and the French Revolution, who had attacked him for accepting a pension from the crown. He set his lifetime of accomplishments against the nothing of their juvenile efforts, his defense of their inherited rank and acres against their coquetting with a power whose universal ambition, if it were able to reach across the water, would have swept away all that they were and owned with a grin. Burke’s prose—sober-paced, weighty, powerful to the point of being overbearing—has always close behind its argumentation a reserve of poetic energy which now gleams, now flashes, and now, as in this letter, explodes in a fireworks of dazzling metaphors, a storm of epical-satirical language that tosses around the duke and earl, great galleons of the nobility, like little cockboats.

When Burke fell out of favor in post-Victorian times, the charge of adventurism turned into the blunter accusation of servility. He wore, an important historian wrote, the “livery” of his noble friends. After World War II the sneer was still being repeated, as I found in an essay by the distinguished historian of the eighteenth-century, the late J. H. Plumb. Burke, said Plumb, was “the servant philosopher of the Rockingham Whigs.” Was Aristotle the servant schoolmaster of Alexander the Great? I suppose he was. To be the political brains of a lord who owned immense tracts of land and who inherited with them without effort great political power according to the hereditary system of old England, when all you yourself owned was your talents, was, of course, to “serve” him. Without patronage, politics was closed to the likes of Burke. He was deferential to aristocratic

rank, yes. Deference, however, wasn’t slavishness; it belonged to the general, largely unquestioned, acknowledgment of rank in pre-modern Britain. It allowed for some mutuality of respect. And it entailed no suspension of his critical faculties.

Burke scolded the peerage in order to bring them up to the measure of their station. He could become quite impatient with his ducal oaks for being planted too, too solidly. During the American crisis he wrote to Rockingham, saying that “the question, then, is whether your Lordship chooses to lead or to be led, to lay down proper ground for yourself, or stand on the ground which will be prepared for you.” In his brilliant *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, he wrote, as part of his attack on the “King’s men,” that

The virtue, spirit, and essence of a House of Commons consists in its being the express image of the feelings of the nation. It was not instituted to be a control *upon* the people, as of late it has been taught. . . . It was designed as a control *for* the people [which was not a control *by* the people].

A sardonic modern knowingness, confident of its better scholarship and better sentiments, dismissed as a myth the once orthodox tradition, which Burke had so large a hand in defining, of Whiggism as the great bulwark of English constitutional liberties. It is now held that what the Whig landed oligarchy defended was its own class privileges. But the idea of class, and of class differences as constituting a fundamental struggle, is a modern one and did not exist yet. The ascendancy of the British aristocracy was a given: thus was the world constituted. Their privileges, which were also called liberties, belonged to them by prescriptive right, the right conferred by ancient custom. The antiquity of customs was a sign of their enduring wisdom, not (as with us) of their superannuation. Upon the liberties of the aristocracy rested its independence, out of which grew a great tradition of public service. And by their ser-

vice the constitutional powers of Parliament in an age of absolutizing monarchies were preserved and maintained for the nation. "Nation," the British nation, meant themselves, to be sure, but we must allow another time to have been itself and not scold it for stupidly (or wickedly) failing to be us. Across the Channel, the same class had been reduced by Louis XIV to the privileged impotence of Versailles courtiers.

Burke was a reformer but opposed "innovation," or drastic (revolutionary) change. He was one with the governing classes of his time in his opposition to democracy. Today we equate democracy and liberty. In fact, it's a loose equation; the two parted company often enough in the twentieth century. For Burke, democracy was the tyranny of the many-headed, as in the classical tradition. It might be respectable under certain conditions—he would "reprobate no form of government merely upon abstract principle"—but to him it smelt of, it was, the mob. His was one of the great voices of political liberty, and he found it upheld by ancient common-law traditions and the patriciate (when it was virtuous) of the hereditary England to which he had come and lent his genius.

What, Burke asked, was the English constitution but the ancient customs, legislated into law, of the English people? Its "sole authority is, that it has existed time out of mind." Burke's term for such authority, prescription, is a legal, not an anthropological, biological, mystical, or any other kind of term. British experience, British history, the community of Britons had created the British body politic without calculation and without system by following "nature, which is wisdom without reflection and above it." Burke despised a speculative, abstract politics; retorting in the *Reflections* to the metaphysical schemers of revolution, English and French, he upheld the spontaneous, improvisatory way the British did things. His great follower in this was the patriot socialist George Orwell. (I have never seen a reference to Burke in Orwell. Are there any?) Writing about the English in

1940 (under Nazi bombs) Orwell said "they have a horror of abstract thought. . . . But they have a certain power of acting without thought." Imagination, feeling, heart play their part in improvisation; revolutionary rationalism excludes them. "In England," Burke wrote, "we have not yet been completely [dis]embowelled of our natural entrails, we still feel . . . those inbred sentiments which are . . . the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals." Orwell one hundred and fifty years later preferred his "God-save-the-King" upbringing to being "like left-wing intellectuals who are so 'enlightened' that they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions."

The British people, Burke wrote, didn't follow ideas. By following nature in its

changeable constancy . . . of decay, fall, renovation, and progression . . . in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete. By adhering in this manner to our forefathers, we are guided not by the superstition of antiquarians, but by the spirit of philosophic analogy.

His traditionalism linked the present to the past, but also, just as importantly, to the future. It was rational, not sentimental.

Burke's argument that time was of the essence in political life, not as swift, decisive action but as slow, accumulated "habitudes," would prove as true for democratic as for aristocratic rule. In an age of revolution, custom was the enemy blocking the way to change. Yet in Britain's case it provided a link to the future as much as it blocked the way to it. Prescription of government, Burke said, is not

formed upon blind unmeaning prejudices—for man is a most unwise, and most wise being. The individual is foolish. The multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise, and when time is given to it as a species it almost always acts right.

The English species (for he didn't mean the human) was indeed given time; it surely did not seize it. Over the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth, with much dissension, after peaceful mass meetings of the people and wild riots, after massacres by the authorities and concessions grudgingly allowed, after the formation of distinct (but not so very distinct) parties, slowly and reluctantly, by a second and third Reform Bill after the first, a Parliament still run by aristocrats conceded political rights to the (respectful, not revolutionary) manufacturing and business classes of the midlands and the north, to the less propertied, and to those without property, until an entire people possessed them. But "rights" isn't the right word if it suggests the Rights of Man. It was more a case of Parliament extending the privileges of the few to the many; step by step it privileged the entire British people.

The egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution had spread in Britain during its first years, but then were checked by stiff repression. They never penetrated deeply and they never would. (Egalitarianism, but not the angry French kind, came late to Britain, during World War II.) Having established parliamentary rule on firm foundations at the end of the seventeenth century, the English aristocracy submitted to that rule when compelled to share its power and when ultimately forced to give it up entirely. The Duke of Wellington, after the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill, foresaw the end of "reverence for old authorities, even for the House of Commons, which will only change to become worse, will render government by royal authority impracticable. . . . [T]he result will be that at last we shall have a revolution gradually accomplished *by due form of law!*" (his emphasis). And so it happened.

The enfranchisement of the entire people, the idea of which Burke so abhorred, was accomplished as a purely British matter, in the spirit of Burke. "[I]t has been the uniform policy of our constitution," he famously wrote in the *Reflections*, "to claim

and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right." Such a purely British liberty, expressly dissociated from any sublime conception uniting the British people with all humanity, signalled a new sense of separation from the Continent. A gentlemanly England had been a part of the Europe of gentlemen. When the French Revolution made war on gentlemen, the English withdrew into insularity. This had its bad consequences. Its good consequence was that it saved them from being drawn too deeply into the hubbub and violence of European revolution and reaction. It allowed them to be a bulwark of liberty for the two centuries during which the guillotine, the gallows, and the death camp seized the rule successively at critical times in Europe.

The great democratic transformation of Britain being gradually accomplished, the hitherto excluded were now able to make their voices heard; life became more just. But admirable elements were lost, too, never to be recovered. Admirable, irrecoverable—such was "the age of high politics" as Bromwich calls it, that Burke "helped to invent," and represented. "High politics" is a good phrase, not least because it suggests a connection with high culture. The politicians of Britain in the eighteenth century (and in the nineteenth, but not in the twentieth) were cultivated men sharing, among many things, the same classical education. Gibbon illustrated this atmosphere in a report, so amusing, of a parliamentary exchange:

Mr. Burke, in the course of some very severe animadversions which he made on Lord North for want of due economy in his management of the public purse, introduced the well-known aphorism, *Magnum vectigal est parsimonia*, but was guilty of a false quantity by saying *vectigal*. Lord North, while this phillipic went on, had

been half asleep, and sat heaving backwards and forwards like a great turtle; but the sound of a false quantity instantly aroused him and, opening his eyes, he exclaimed in a very marked and distinct manner, "vectigal." "I thank the noble Lord," said Burke, with happy adroitness, "for the correction, the more particularly as it affords me the opportunity of repeating a maxim which he greatly needs to have reiterated upon him." He then thundered out "magnum vectigal est parsimonia." (Cicero: Thrift is a large income.)

In such an atmosphere of intimacy and common culture, bombast, vanity, sophistry, hypocrisy, and falsehood were no less active than usual, but perhaps it was harder to outface scrutiny.

Politics, a free politics, for Burke was the contest of principled parties for power. Men came together who had common interests but also common convictions about the common good. A "generous contention for power" was easily distinguished from "the mean and interested struggle" of factions. Politics today by comparison is shockingly low in the mostly lip-service it pays to the common good. Just as shocking is its economization. Today politicians offer themselves as agents of economic interests; political assemblies turn into marketplaces, the body politic into a body economic. A society with an enervated political and all-absorbing economic life is threatened by triviality, a life of jobs and cars, which threatens worse things in turn.

Burke's chief concerns before 1789 were Ireland, America, and India. His own efforts on behalf of Catholic Ireland he reckoned of small account in the end. His second great concern, the American colonies, engaged his energies from his first day as an MP. It was a subject about which he came to know a great deal and the English knew little and cared less, except as the colonies were a source of wealth and pride of empire. British policy vacillated between rigor and retreat. Burke urged a policy of generosity.

I first read his speech *On Conciliation with the Colonies* in a Brooklyn high school, Erasmus Hall, before World War II, when it was still a required text. I remembered only one detail from it: the epic passage about the American whaling ships running (the passage) like a great wave from the mountains of ice and frozen recesses of Hudson's Bay and Davis's Straits all the way down to Falkland Island and the frigid Antipodes,

Today we equate democracy and liberty. In fact, it's a loose equation; the two parted company often enough in the twentieth century. For Burke, democracy was the tyranny of the many-headed, as in the classical tradition.

from the whalers' striking the harpoon on the coast of Africa to running the longitude in pursuit of the gigantic game along the coast of Brazil. I was an avid Melville reader then, so the passage stayed with me; the words were grand and made me feel American pride. I did not have the understanding to remember the passage's lovely peroration, with its reverence for the free, unconstrained development of the "happy form" of colonial society.

[W]hen I know that the colonies in general owe little or nothing to any care of ours, and that they are not squeezed into this happy form by the constraints of a watchful and suspicious government, but that through a wise and salutary neglect, a generous nature has been suffered to take her own way to perfection. . . . I feel all the pride of power sink, and all the presumption in the wisdom of human contrivance melt, and die away within me. My rigour relents. I pardon something to the spirit of Liberty.

Do not, he urged the British, insist on your

abstract rights of sovereignty. "The question with me is, not whether you have a right to render your people miserable, but whether it is not your interest to make them happy." But the British insisted on their sovereign rights.

With the American colonies it had been possible to imagine the empire as a body held together by the noble bond of liberty. That was not possible in India's case. Burke's doubt of the imperial idea turned into a ferocious indignation. He waged a fourteen years' campaign to expose the crimes of the East India Company and to impeach its governor general. But again he failed.

Burke grew old and tired, embittered by what he felt was "his perpetual failure," quoting Ovid: "Shame when an old man is a soldier." Perhaps he would retire. And then came 1789. Into battle he rushed again with his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. He had stood in the past against monarchical power and the oppression of subject peoples. A man of notable humanity, in lesser matters as in great, he had stood for kinder treatments and gentler punishments. Now he had taken his stand on the other side, on the side of kings and old oppression—or so it appeared in 1790 to his shocked friend, the Whig leader Charles James Fox, to the Whig party, to the reformers, and to his correspondent and friend of sorts, the radical Tom Paine. He was a Whig; he belonged to the party of the English Revolution; how could he oppose the French one?

Burke's answer was, he had defended liberty against the monarchical threat, now he was defending it against the "democratist" one ("democratist" meaning the direct democracy of the Paris sans-culottes). At the end of the *Reflections* he wrote that it was no intention of his "to belie the tenour of his life"; as in a vessel overloaded on one side, he had shifted the "small weight of his reasons" to the other side so as "to preserve the equipoise." But to his former allies he hadn't preserved the balance of the Whig

vessel; he had jumped ship and deserted to the enemy.

Burke was a staunch upholder of Whiggism first and last, the founding principle of which was the rejection of absolutism. He would advocate a war against Jacobinism with furious insistence but never a Restoration. Yet his Whiggism *had* changed. He had come to fear for the survival of the England that he knew, for England's *ancien régime* as Professor Clark calls it. The *Reflections*, as much about England as France, was a retort to a November 1789 sermon by a "political theologian and theological politician," Dr. Richard Price, a dissenting divine who interpreted the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in a radical democratic sense and hailed the French Revolution as a still more glorious triumph signalling the downfall of tyranny and priestcraft and a utopian future of benevolence and world citizenship. A year later Dr. Price proposed a toast: "The Parliament of Britain—May it become a NATIONAL ASSEMBLY." (If there is such a thing as a historical shudder, this gives you it.) "Burke's aim until the 1780s," writes Clark, "was to win power within the old order of society by condemning its vices and championing its virtues." But then becoming alarmed at the union of religious and political heterodoxy, his aim changed "in the 1790s [to one of] defend[ing] the old order as such, virtues and vices together."

Events justified Burke against his critics about the direction in which the French Revolution would go. It ushered in no ideal state, no brave new world, no constitutional monarchy; on the contrary, it brought about a euphoric-anarchic convulsion of street, assembly, and countryside. The first *government* it achieved was the Jacobin dictatorship of terror and war in 1793–94. Fox clung for years to the notion that 1789 was the French 1688, until he could no more. After which, it was reported, he said that Burke was right after all, he was often right, "only he was right too soon." An anticipation of "premature anti-communism"!

Burke was right after all, he was *politically* right. Liberty, however, which is first of all a

political thing, came in time to be less regarded. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, representative government, with its noisy contentions of political parties, fell into contempt, which it partly earned by scandal and corruption. The liberal democratic social order was condemned as a whole, from the left and from

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the right. To understand this, we need to go back to Rousseau, who was among the first to envisage and judge society as a whole. His influence, extraordinary in the eighteenth century, is by no means dead. One Rousseauvian influence is stronger than ever. Ernst Cassirer expressed succinctly what it is: "Rousseau created a new responsibility for evil; neither God nor man but human society." There was a personal motive involved in this new accounting for evil: Rousseau's desire to shift from himself the responsibility for his long succession of contemptible acts. They did not touch his inner being, his soul, he said in the *Confessions*; his virtue kept its purity. If he wasn't responsible for his own actions, who was? Society, Rousseau declared, meaning the rich and powerful. In finding society guilty, "poor Jean-Jacques," as he called himself—Tartuffe as François Mauriac called him—attempted to get himself off the hook. In extending this principle to a general truth, he got us all off the hook.

To recognize that society bears a heavy responsibility for the evil in the world was indeed to discover a great truth, a sociological truth. But this scientific truth was distorted significantly to make the modern claim of universal innocence. As Joseph K. tells the priest in *The Trial*: "Wie kann denn ein Mensch überhaupt schuldig sein?" (How can a man—any man—be called guilty?) Rousseau argued that what made men bad were the institutions of inequality, by which society is structured in depth.

It seemed to follow that politics was a superficial agitation of the surface, while the real movement of things took place down below, in the social depths. The bright light of uncovered social truth, shining upwards, exposed the political lie. Britain's celebrated liberty, what was it but the rule of an oligarchy? What was the democratic freedom of America but the freedom of cotton-growers to enslave blacks, of capitalists to enslave workers? The Marx of the British Library and *Capital* also dismissed political action as ineffectual. What would bring capitalist society down were its internal contradictions—it would fall not by the action of parties (whose actions are determined by individuals) but of impersonal forces. But since it is only in the political that one finds liberty, the devaluation of politics was the devaluation of liberty. Movements—which is to say organized mobs—supplanted or challenged political parties in much of Europe and elsewhere, proclaiming one or another kind of social justice. Social equality isn't liberty. It can be obtained without liberty. Burke, as an undistracted political man, never lost sight of the interest of liberty, whether in America, India, Ireland, or revolutionary France.

In 1788 he had hoped to see France reform herself into a society enjoying constitutional liberties under a constitutional king. What he saw in 1789 was a France turned completely upside down, a democratic ideology proclaimed (not a democratic system established) and equality achieved in the street in the form of what

Simon Schama calls “the liberation of disrespect.” Liberty, whose agency was the Revolution’s representative assemblies, was weak from the start, menaced by the sans-culotte mob. They embodied, they were sure, Rousseau’s general will, that anticipation of totalitarianism. Their interest was socio-economic (bread, price controls, and poor relief), not political, in equality of sacrifice, not in liberty. Suspicious of middle-class representatives, they sat in at the Constitutional Assembly’s sessions with Marat’s *L’Ami du peuple* sticking out of their pockets, shouting and cursing. Sometimes they climbed down from the gallery and sat among the representatives. The deputies, Burke wrote,

act like the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience . . . amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob . . . who . . . direct, control, applaud, explode [hoot] them; and sometimes mix and take their seats amongst them.

Such an overthrow of absolutism inspired no enthusiasm in Burke. He saw clearly what a century-and-a-half of democratic and radical opinion ignored or excused: that the Revolution would allow no room for disagreement, much less opposition. “The dictators in Paris,” as he called them, “proceed in argument as if . . . those who reprobate their crude and violent schemes of liberty ought to be treated as advocates for servitude. . . . Have these gentlemen never heard . . . of anything between the despotism of the monarch and the despotism of the multitude?” Differing from reigning revolutionary opinion was to advocate counter-revolution; opposing it was counter-revolution itself. “In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.”

The liberal representatives of the Constituent Assembly courted the illiberal democracy of the sans-culottes in what Burke called an “auction of popularity.” It was an uneasy alliance: the mob saved the Revolution in 1789 and it could overthrow it—which it did in 1792. The pseudo-con-

stitutional regime fell before the mob’s invasion of the Tuileries on August 10. The slaughter at the Tuileries was outdone in September—when it was learned that the Prussians had taken Verdun—by the sadistic, drunken massacres of the Paris prison population. Those responsible for order, Danton and Roland, did nothing. The Girondins, after beating the drums for war and denouncing royal plots, now justified-deplored the massacres they had done so much to provoke.

Burke, in his 1794 “Preface” to a translation of an address by the Girondin leader Brissot, quoted from a letter the always moral Roland wrote to the Assembly, as the slaughter continued at full swing. (The italicization of Roland’s circumlocutions and lies is Burke’s, with one exception.)

Yesterday was a day upon the events of which it is perhaps necessary to leave a *veil*; I know that that people with their vengeance *mingled a sort of justice*; they did not take for victims *all who presented themselves to their fury*; they directed it *to them who for a long time had been spared by the sword of law*, and who they *believed*, from the peril of circumstances, should be sacrificed without delay. But I know that it is easy to *villains and traitors* to misrepresent this *effervescence*, and that it must be checked.

This is perfect newspeak: “victims who presented themselves for slaughter” (less mad in the idiomatic French); mass murder as “effervescence” when committed by the virtuous populace of Paris. “The whole compass of the language,” Burke commented, “is tried to find synonyms and circumlocutions for massacre and murder.” One hundred and fifty years later, J. H. Plumb, in his *England in the Eighteenth Century*, wrote:

In Paris the Committee of Public Safety . . . was transforming the French economy. The flamboyant use of the guillotine has distracted attention from the extraordinary efficiency of

the Terror in mobilizing the industrial resources and manpower of France.

Flamboyant! It's a match for Roland's "effervescence." The two light-hearted words, centuries apart, have the same purpose: to defend the indefensible. They deprecate urbanely a horrified human response to the appalling barbarism of the Terror, excused by Roland as *a sort of justice* and credited by Plumb with the *extraordinary efficiency* with which the Jacobins, institutionalizing it, organized the war effort.

How did intelligent, cultivated people, then and later, come to excuse these abominations which ordinary simplicity sees for what they are? One answer, of course partial, seems to be the deep shift, anticipated by Rousseau, of moral feeling away from concern for liberty to concern for social justice.

The cause of liberty rallied men in the nineteenth century against the European dynasties. But even as Parliamentary democracy triumphed, it was attacked by a left intelligentsia tending towards socialism and a right intelligentsia refusing modern conditions. Liberal democracy in the first half of the twentieth century was always taken to task (for good and bad reasons) and taken for granted, at the same time. The cost was tremendous. I recollect reading recently what a historian of present-day slavery (which continues to exist in many parts of the world) said about the phrase "peculiar institution," once a periphrasis for black servitude in the American South: "Peculiar institution? Slavery isn't peculiar. What's peculiar is liberty."

Burke has been called a liberal, a conservative, a reactionary. He was none of these. They are all terms from the political taxonomy of our world, not his. Whether you are for or against him, he touches you on your own political pulse—whereupon history tends to fly out the window. Consider the exchange between Conor Cruise O'Brien and Isaiah Berlin (appended to the former's biography of Burke, *The Great*

Melody). O'Brien, arguing that Burke "was a liberal and pluralist [!] opponent" of the murderous utopian absolutism of the French Revolution, called on Berlin to retract his charge (in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*) that Burke was a reactionary.

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Good-humoredly, Berlin complied at once: O'Brien was right; Berlin's knowledge of Burke was no more than the common stuff one picks up: "all honor" to Burke for "seeing through the fallacy and danger of utopian universalism." He had, however, some qualifications: Burke was "deeply illiberal [in his] respect for hierarchy, and for rule by a gentlemanly elite"; in his opposition to democracy; in his failure to recognize general human rights. Wasn't Burke "in some way" a defender "of some kind of *ancien régime*, though not perhaps to the degree to which my maverick colleague in All Souls, Jonathan [C. D.] Clark tries to make out? . . . Don't you think Burke might have been somewhat Pétainiste" if he had been a Frenchman of that later time? (What a question!) Berlin thus retracted his retraction. To be "somewhat Pétainiste" is to be as reactionary as you can get, is to be "somewhat" liable to the death sentence for betraying your country.

You throw your hands up in dismay to see how all historical sense has deserted both men.

Of course Burke was no reactionary. How

could he wish to turn the clock back? The time it told—the hour of a hereditary, aristocratic, constitutional Britain—was the very hour in which he lived and moved and had his being.

Of course Burke, as a Whig upholder of hierarchy and degree, was no liberal. Liberals hardly existed yet. What kind of liberal would believe your station in life was appointed by Providence?

Of course Burke, as a Whig reformer (except in the case of electoral reform), was no conservative. Conservatives also did not yet exist. “People will not look forward to posterity,” he wrote in the *Reflections*, “who never look backward to their ancestors.” His traditionalism looked *forward*.

Of course Burke was a defender of what

the “maverick” Clark, as an historian, called England’s *ancien régime*. But for Burke living in it, it wasn’t *ancien*, it was *actuel*.

Then what more specifically than a Whig may one call Burke without insulting history? The maverick Clark provides, I think, a fitting word for a man (like Orwell) hard to pigeonhole: libertarian, a man of liberty.

When the chips were down in dire totalitarian times, it was patrician leaders who showed themselves the most stubborn defenders of liberty: Churchill, de Gaulle, Franklin Roosevelt. Such men were understood by Burke (as I quoted David Bromwich earlier as putting it) as “the steadiest resource of liberty.” And the same may be said of the Irish commoner who spoke for them.

Editor’s note: We wish to call our readers’ attention to the publication of *Facsimiles of Time: Essays on Poetry and Translation*, by Eric Ormsby (Porcupine’s Quill, \$22.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

Simone Weil: A saint for our time?

by Jillian Becker

August 23, 2002, will be the fifty-ninth anniversary of the death of Simone Weil, a French Jew revered by many Christians as an uncanonized saint. Exegetes of diverse faiths (and none) have written at length about her mystical meditations. André Gide declared her “the most spiritual writer of this [twentieth] century.” Albert Camus called her “the only great spirit of our time.”

While she lived she published very little: a few articles on political and social questions mostly in trade union papers; a few essays on literary themes, including one on *The Iliad* in the Marseilles journal *Cahiers du Sud* in the winter of 1940–41. The bulk of her work, the religious writing, was left in the form of manuscripts, notes on a theme—often in the form of *aperçu* rather than argument—and letters. The theologian Gustave Thibon collected and published some of these after the Second World War, thus bringing her to the notice of intellectuals throughout the European world and launching her international reputation. Numerous collections are now available, in many languages, and volumes on her life and work proliferate. First they trickled and then they poured from the university presses of Europe and America. The Reader’s Catalog from *The New York Review of Books* currently lists eighty-nine titles under “Simone Weil.” Amazon.com has forty-three books for sale, by her or about her, published since 1987, of which about one-third have appeared in the last year or are about to appear, and these are in the

English language only. Dozens of references to her are to be found in many a language any week of the year in publications dealing with religion, philosophy, literature, politics, sociology, twentieth-century history, classical Greece.

According to Francine du Plessix Gray in a recent biography of Weil,¹ Pope Paul VI claimed her as one of the three—with Pascal and Bernanos—most important influences on his intellectual development. It may be that the only reason she is not and is never likely to be Saint Simone is that she was never baptized. She refused baptism a number of times, the last as she lay dying. She regarded herself, however, as a true Christian, too true, by her own understanding, to become a member of the Catholic Church (the only existing church to which she felt drawn). She felt she could be “faithful to Christ” without being a member of the Church; perhaps even more so because she was outside it. “A few sheep should remain outside the fold to bear witness that the love of Christ is essentially something different.”

Simone Adolphine Weil was born in Paris on February 3, 1909, the second child and

¹ *Simone Weil*, by Francine du Plessix Gray; Viking, 246 pages, \$19.95. Though adding nothing of significance to the heaps of published information, this is a readable account of Weil’s life and work, and, while the author generously gives her subject the benefit of almost all possible doubts, she is not entirely uncritical.

only daughter of Bernard and Selma Weil. Her father was a well-to-do physician. He and his wife belonged to that large international class of cultivated, bourgeois Jews who were left-wing in their politics and considered themselves heirs of the Enlightenment rather than of Mosaic Law, or survivors of the Inquisition and the ghetto. Marx and Freud were their prophets. If they were not observant of their ancestral faith in their daily lives, they were still generally inclined to acknowledge its traditions and to turn up dutifully once a year to their parents' or grandparents' Passover dinners.

Perhaps the only thing typically (though of course not exclusively) Jewish about the upbringing of the Weil children was its intellectual climate. What such parents expected of a son and—perhaps to a lesser extent—of a daughter, was that he, and she if at all possible, be a genius. It seemed they would not be disappointed in the case of the boy. Early on, André showed himself to be a talented mathematician. His sister had no such distinction. She saw this as a fault and a failing, and was deeply envious of André. His gifts made her feel so inferior that at the age of fourteen (she was to confess in later years) she fell into despair. Hope revived in her, however, when the thought came to her that there was another way to qualify for entry into the paradise of genius.

At fourteen I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live without that truth. After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural

faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from outside.

It seems this conviction and desire did indeed last her the rest of her life. Towards the end, when she came to believe she had the truth in her grasp, she was certain it was her key to the kingdom: that through long “concentration of attention” she had become one of the elect. Her particular, inconspicuous genius had its special task: to invent a new saintliness and for that it had to be a superior sort of genius.

Today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself also without precedent. . . . A new type of sanctity . . . is almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny. . . . More genius is needed [to invent it] than was needed by Archimedes to invent mechanics and physics. A new saintliness is a still more marvellous invention.

She was welcomed to the heights after her death. T. S. Eliot said of her explicitly: “We must expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of a saint.”

It was a hard climb, but Weil had both natural and circumstantial advantages to start her off. As an adolescent she was intelligent enough, and strove hard enough, to do well at the excellent schools her parents sent her to. In June 1925 she took her *baccalauréat* and later that year entered the Lycée Henri IV, where for three years she studied under Emile-August Chartier, better known by his pen-name Alain. She learned Greek, revelled in Homer, took Plato to her heart. She went on to be trained as a teacher at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, having come top in the entrance exam, just ahead of Simone de Beauvoir.

She now had reason to take pride in her own abilities and achievements and did not seem lacking in self-confidence. Quite the opposite, she expressed her opinions with a vehemence that was often taken for arrogance. In her student days she was earnestly and ardently committed to atheism, Marxism, pacifism, and trade unionism. Earnestness and ardor were to characterize all intellectual commitments throughout her short life. Her beliefs changed, but not the intensity with which she held them and pressed them on others. She was argumentative, quibbling, cutting, and boring, as well as overbearing and unable to concede even an inch to an opposing view. Nor was this leavened by any sense of humor; her manner was often abrupt and discourteous.

Yet, she was in private miserably unsure of herself. And though she wanted people to understand that she was right, she did not want them to think she was vain. As a child she had pretty features, fine dark eyes, soft waving hair, but in her later teens she sabotaged her looks. From her student days onward, she dressed in long, wide skirts and shapeless coats of drab color, a woollen cap or beret in winter, and flat shoes. Whether to deny herself the vanity of preening or because she was too absorbed in thought (or for some other reason), she neglected her body. She seldom washed or brushed her teeth (opining that "too much washing" had gone on in her childhood home). Her hair went uncombed. Her eyesight was poor, and her eyes were distorted by the thick lenses of her glasses. Even as she pinned a person down with words, her respect conveyed the message: "keep your distance." It was understood among her relations, friends, and acquaintances that she disliked physical contact. This, she said, was because of her own "disgustingness." A kiss revolted her. She did not want to attract sexually or be attracted. She spoke plainly of her "total sexlessness." Yet her choice of drabness and inconspicuousness was not made without a sigh: "For other people, in a sense I do not exist. I am the color of dead leaves, like certain unnoticed insects."

Weil's career as a teacher of philosophy began in 1931, and for the most part was a failure. She had her own theories of pedagogy, pet methods, and on the whole colleagues and superiors did not like them. She was "transferred" from her first job at a girls' school in Le Puy after she had marched in a demonstration with the unemployed. But the loss of her position did not make her one of them. The state was obliged to re-employ her.

While waiting for another post, she visited Germany "to observe the political situation." This was 1932, after Hitler's National Socialists had won more than a third of the votes in the general election. What she learnt about Nazism left her in no doubt that it was an evil movement, but she believed she understood the nature of its appeal. She wrote, with a touch of appalled fascination: "If there were twenty or so young Germans in front of me at this minute, singing Nazi songs in chorus, part of me would immediately become Nazi."

She could not have failed to be aware that Hitler and his movement were intensely anti-Semitic, but she made no special mention of it. She did, however, record some antagonistic views of her own about the Jews: "Look, here is evil! . . . A people chosen for moral blindness, chosen to be the murderers of Christ. . . . The Jews, this handful of uprooted people, have caused the uprooting of the whole planet." She declared that the Old Testament was "a tissue of horrors"—though she excepted Job, most of the Psalms, the Song of Solomon, "the second Isaiah," Daniel, and some of the Prophets. She refused to identify Jehovah with the Trinitarian "God the Father." Jehovah, to her mind, was an evil god who "made the same promises to Israel as the Devil did to Christ," and who, "having taken the Jews out of Pharaoh's hands, succeeded to Pharaoh's rights."

Having to deal with these opinions in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Weil's defenders have tried to point to her sympathy for all human suffering—for which the evidence is her own claim. According to her,

Contact with the affliction of other people, those who are indifferent or unknown to me as much as the others, perhaps even more so, including those of the most remote ages of antiquity, causes me such atrocious pain and so utterly rends my soul that as a result the love of God becomes almost impossible for me for a while.

This feeling for others, especially unknown others, was, she averred, the source of her own deepest suffering. It seems she could feel, as many humanitarians do, more for distant and anonymous people *en masse* than for particular individuals. She confessed to grudging people known to her the distinction of suffering: "With any human being taken individually, I always find reasons for concluding that sorrow and misfortune do not suit him, either because he seems too mediocre for anything so great, or on the contrary, too precious to be destroyed." She herself did not fall into either of these categories. Neither self-contempt ("succumbing every day to laziness and inertia compels me to despise myself") nor humility ("the root of love . . . it has an irresistible power over God") inhibited her yearning to belong to the ranks of the pitiable. She watched for an opportunity to share their lot.

Her next teaching posts were at Auxerre and Rouen, where again she practiced her "controversial" methods, again marched with protesters, and so was yet again euphemistically dismissed, this time "given a year's leave from teaching." She decided to work and live as a manual laborer. Workers were not only "more real" but also "more beautiful than the bourgeoisie." Taken on at a factory, she resolved to support herself entirely on her wages, but when she could not find somewhere to live at a rent she could afford, her parents helped her—though she refused to let them make her comfortable, preferring to keep her rooms cold, uncleaned, and almost bare of furniture. She wanted them to understand and appreciate that she cared nothing for material things. Her first employer was an electri-

cal appliance manufacturer. Clumsy and slow, she was sacked after three months. Next she took a job as a packer, but did the work too badly to be kept on longer than three weeks.

She would not eat enough to keep healthy and felt constantly unwell. She suffered from chronic sinusitis. Headaches, which had plagued her from the age of puberty, were becoming more frequent, persistent, and severe. Pain and weakness kept her off work for weeks, then she joined a Renault production line. Soon she was again exhausted "physically and spiritually," and her parents took her to Portugal for a rest.

Weil felt she had been spiritually transformed by her "year of factory work." The experience had brought human suffering home to her, so that it "entered her soul" permanently. She said her deepest suffering was now for the downtrodden, the poor, the exploited, the wretched of the industrialized world. She had been made to "regard [herself] as a slave," not just while she was at work on the production line, where her cack-handedness and habit of daydreaming provoked foremen to treat her with rough impatience, but permanently, for the rest of her life. From that time on, she said, she always expected to be spoken to brutally, and if addressed in any other way, she "felt there must be some mistake." Yet her own humiliation, headaches, sinusitis, and weariness did not distress her as severely as the empathetic anguish with which she was filled.

It was at this point that Christianity began seriously to interest Weil, but she was still some months away from the moment of her conversion. She returned to teaching when she felt strong enough, this time with a little more success. A school in Bourges appreciated her methods. She earned a good salary—too good in her view. It is said that she gave "most of it" away.

Unwilling to give up her dream of living and working with the poor, she went in the spring of 1936 into the country to taste the peasant life and try her hand at farm labor. She found she had as little aptitude for the

drudgery of the farm as of the factory. And she was soon called away by a more urgent appeal to her heart. In July, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and her sympathy with Marxism, especially its development as syndicalism—an ideology that had engaged her passions since her student days—sent her irresistibly to the field of conflict. Still a pacifist in sentiment, she was armed only with press accreditation from a trade union publication. She attached herself to an anarchist-syndicalist fighting group in Aragon. As a noncombatant without any practical skills, there was not much she could do. She undertook to mind the campfire and help with the cooking, but, awkward as she was, succeeded only in knocking over a pan of boiling oil and severely scalding one of her legs. Her parents came to Spain to find her, took her out of the hospital, and looked after her themselves in a hotel until she was well enough to go back to France.

On returning to France she applied for and was granted sick leave from teaching and sought rest abroad again, this time in the quieter resorts of Switzerland and Italy. She spent most of her days writing articles on social and political questions and thinking about philosophical-religious ideas. In the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, she knelt where St. Francis had knelt to pray. She had long felt an affinity with this saint, whose background and ideals were not unlike her own. He too had been a child of affluent urban parents, and he too had felt drawn away from ease and comfort to a life of self-abnegation and poverty.

Back home, she took up her last teaching post. She worked through part of the winter of 1937–38, but in the cold of January retreated to the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes. Feeling low-spirited and hopeless, and sick with almost continuous headaches, she resolved to kill herself, but not immediately. She would “live conditionally, for a trial period.”

Then she heard the monks’ Gregorian chants, and the beauty of the music won her

wholly to Christianity. It was “an experience of mystical revelation.” At Solesmes, an English Catholic introduced her to the works of the Metaphysical poets Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw, and in them she found more comfort and inspiration. She had found faith without losing her suffering and that was how she wanted it to be. God, she wrote, was in the suffering itself, and she would not be without it: “God’s love for us is the very substance of this bitterness and this mutilation.” She composed a terrible prayer, begging for affliction in the extreme.

May all this [sensitivity, intelligence, love] be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ’s substance, and given for food to the afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment. And let me be paralytic—blind, deaf, witless and utterly decrepit. . . . Father, since thou art the Good and I am mediocrity, rend this body and soul away from me and make them into things for your use, and let nothing remain of me, forever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness.

Politics no longer absorbed her, though she did not, could not, ignore the political stormclouds gathering over Europe. Dreadful things were happening, just as they had happened before, but they were not more to be noticed than the state of her own soul. In the light of unfolding events, she modified her political opinions. She became critical of Marxism (“revolution, not religion, is the opium of the people”) and perceived that Stalinism had much in common with Nazism. When the Germans seized Czechoslovakia, she gave up her longheld belief in pacifism.

The occupation of Prague was carried out in mid-March 1939. Weil was resting in Geneva at the time, under the care of her parents. In that same month her brother André left Europe for America with his wife Eveline. (He was to become a Professor of Mathematics at Princeton.) When war was declared in the following September, Dr. and Mrs. Weil returned with their daughter

to Paris, but after France fell to Germany, they moved, like many other prudent Jewish families, to the unoccupied part of the country under the Vichy regime.

They lived in Marseilles. Weil wanted to stay in France, or at least in French territory. She applied to the government for a post in Algeria, but anti-Jewish statutes had been enacted, and she was abruptly reminded that Jews were forbidden employment in the state education service.

Now for the first time in her life she had to confront the fact of her own Jewishness. It was made to matter to her. Also for the first time in her life she was put in the position of a victim not by her own choosing. It was mild victimization in light of what was befalling many of the Jews of Europe, but here she was, classed involuntarily among the *Untermenschen*, her choice frustrated, her professional career halted.

Rejection on the grounds that she was Jewish could not have come to her as a bolt from the blue, but as a bolt it struck her. She winced under it, smarted from its unfairness. Yet in the light of her temperament, her history, and her idealism, might one not fairly ask: why did she not see this hardship as a gift? Was this not her opportunity to come out strong? She who had for so long thought of herself as the champion of the oppressed, the comforter of the afflicted, who felt only for them and not for herself and desired so ardently to share in their lot, to bear their anguish with them, was now almost inescapably one of them. She had the words to protest; she had the courage to endure; she had the intellect to perceive, analyze, understand, clarify the issue; and she had the will, a positive ardor, to suffer in the cause of suffering humanity. Compassion was her calling. So what might be expected of her now? At the very least, perhaps just to start with, she could publish a denunciation of the Vichy government and its craven collaboration with the Nazis in their policy of persecution and genocide. Had not the Jews a claim, at least as great as any other oppressed people if not at this

moment greater, on those who routinely published protests against oppression and injustice? Now, would-be saint and martyr, now is your hour!

She did not seize it. She wrote to the government, and, yes, it was a letter of protest. She reasoned with them sharply against what she felt to be an injustice—one inflicted on Professor Simone Weil personally. Not one word did she say about the evil of anti-Semitism, not one word on behalf of the Jews who were being stripped of all they possessed, torn from their families, deported, imprisoned, starved, enslaved, tortured, and massacred. The letter was entirely and exclusively a complaint that the authorities had classed her as a Jew. She argued that to call her Jewish was an unfounded, unreasonable allegation.

I do not know the definition of the word, "Jew"; that subject was not included in my education. The Statute, it is true, defines a Jew as "a person who has three or more Jewish grandparents." But this simply carries the difficulty two generations back. Does this word designate a religion? I have never been in a synagogue, and have never witnessed a Jewish ceremony. As for my grandparents—I remember that my paternal grandmother used to go to the synagogue, and I think I have heard that my paternal grandfather did likewise. On the other hand, I know definitely that both my maternal grandparents were free-thinkers. Thus if it is a matter of religion, it would appear that I have only two Jewish grandparents, and so am not a Jew according to the Statute. But perhaps the word designates a race? In that case, I have no reason to believe that I have any link, maternal or paternal, to the people who inhabited Palestine two thousand years ago. . . . I myself, who profess no religion and never have, have certainly inherited nothing from the Jewish religion. . . . I would say that if there were a religious tradition which I regard as my patrimony, it is the Catholic tradition. In short, mine is the Christian, French, Greek tradition. The Hebraic tradition is alien to me, and no Statute can make it otherwise.

The ministry of education was unpersuaded, and she remained banned from teaching. She left France in October 1942 with her parents, but not without a pang. Her antipathy to nationalism and patriotism changed. What she called “tearing up her roots” felt “like treason.”

After a brief stay in a refugee camp in Casablanca, she and her parents went to New York. Weil attended mass daily. She read about the war and regretted, ever more as the months went by, that she was being of no use in it. Eventually she wrote to a former fellow student, Maurice Schumann, who was running one of the offices of the Free French in London, and asked him to give her a job. He agreed to employ her, and she sailed for England in a Swedish ship.

The clerical work she had to do was uninteresting, and she did not deceive herself that it was of much help to her country. She still daydreamed of performing heroic deeds. She composed a carefully reasoned recommendation that a special unit of women be formed to give first aid and spiritual comfort to men wounded on the battlefield while they awaited transport to hospital. She saw herself as a leader of these courageous women, angels of gentle mercy and down-to-earth paragons of deft efficiency. But she was already near the end of her sad life.

She had no strong wish to go on living. On the contrary, she believed that death was the moment at which she would be united with God, a consummation she devoutly wished.

Our existence is made up only of His waiting for our own acceptance not to exist. He is perpetually begging from us that existence which He gives. He gives it to us in order to beg it from us.

We possess nothing in this world other than the power to say I. This is what we should yield up to God, and that is what we should destroy.

Suicide, however, was not the way because “The self is not annihilated by com-

mitting suicide.” She simply did little to keep herself alive. She ate hardly anything and dressed so poorly in the wet freezing weather that the landlady of the upmarket Holland Park house in which she rented a pleasant bedsitter thought she must be very poor and offered her a smaller, cheaper room under the roof-beams. In truth, her parents saw to it that she had the means to live well; she simply chose not to. She gladly moved into the austere little garret where she shivered and coughed away her last winter. She would not heat the room because she said she could not bear to be comfortable while her French compatriots were suffering. She ate less and less “because in France they are going hungry.” In April 1943, she was hospitalized. Tuberculosis and inanition were diagnosed, but she refused treatment and still would not eat enough food to gain strength.

Somehow she survived until sultry August. Then she said that she would like to go into the country, and since her parents, whom until then she had kept ignorant of her illness, would pay whatever it cost, she was borne away to a private nursing home at Ashford in Kent. A week later, she died of starvation.

In the 1950s, Simone Weil’s posthumous reputation began to grow and has not stopped growing. Catholics and Protestants, mystics of esoteric faiths and cults, New Age pundits, students of Greek philosophy, academics, idealists, and dogmatists continue to find inspiration and validation in what they believe she thought or stood for. In 1968, student rioters in Western Europe, indulging themselves incontinently in declarations and gestures of compassion, lauded her as a defector from her own class to the ranks of the workers. In the same era she was esteemed by Eastern European dissidents as an anti-Communist of purified Marxist ideals. The Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz translated some of Weil’s work in 1958. Later, while Poland was still under Communism, he wrote an essay titled “The Importance of Simone Weil.” “France,” he wrote, “offered a

rare gift to the contemporary world in the person of Simone Weil.”

Milosz saw in Weil’s commitment to a non-orthodox Christianity an example for a commitment of his own to a non-orthodox Marxism. He himself was still an admirer of Marx however much he disliked the Communist regime under which he had lived. Marx, he declared in the same essay, was “a seeker of pure truth” wanting “to liberate man from the pressures of group ethics.” He unfortunately fell into the error of opposing “class-dominated ethics with the new ethics of professional revolutionaries,” which was also “group ethics.” This “paved the way” for a form of domination by the new great beast: Stalinist totalitarianism.

Marxists do not generally admire Christian mystics. Catholics do not generally revere crusaders against the “pressures of group ethics.” Yet numbers of both revere and admire Simone Weil. What is it about her that finds a sympathetic response in devotees of such different creeds? Did she manifest or express some vital aspect of twentieth-century *Zeitgeist* that continues to haunt us? I think she did. Milosz comes close to putting his finger on it when he points out in his essay that she was, “at least by temperament,” a Cathar—Weil herself had declared that her religious beliefs were closest to these medieval dualistic heretics.

To her, as to them, the human soul was a moral battlefield where good and evil were locked in a time-long conflict. Like Gnostic thinkers, such as the Marcionites of the second century, she denounced the god of the Jews as a lesser and evil god, and sought to be reunited in spirit with the true but absent God, the God who is goodness itself, the Platonic ideal or essence of goodness.

Some Gnostic sects so abominated the moral law of Jehovah that they inverted the values of good and evil as explicitly as does Milton’s Satan when he proclaims “Evil be thou my Good.” To the orthodox Christian doctrine of redemption *from* sin, these Gnostics opposed a doctrine of redemption

by sin. Some believed that the tiny spiritual spark of divinity which is all that mortals have of goodness in their vile material bodies could be reunited with the remote god only if they eschewed what the Bible called good and conscientiously committed what it called sin. Their religious rites were orgies of unrestrained libertinism (according to the disgusted church fathers who wrote about them). Others, equally libertine, did not declare evil to be good and good evil but maintained that by sinning they were “consuming” sin, using it up, so that the world would be purged of it.

It was not with either of these that Weil expressed sympathy, but with the Cathars’ form of dualism. They are supposed to have believed—supposed, as the only record of their beliefs is that collected by their inquisitorial persecutors—that purity could be attained only by abstention from fleshly pleasures. The body, being evil, must be denied its loathsome material satisfactions. When a Cathar felt he was coming close to the end of his life, he could choose to be a martyr by undergoing a purification rite called the *Endura* and then fasting to death. It was common for the most devout Cathars to die of starvation. Weil’s mind and spirit concurred.

It is here, in her affinity for the spiritual extremity of the Cathars, that we must seek the quality that makes Weil attractive to so many. Ours is an age in which intellectuals, artists, philosophers, mystics, rebels, and multitudes of the indefinably discontented feel themselves to be heroic antagonists of this world and its evil gods, “wrestling”—to use words attributed to St. Paul—“not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against the spirit of wickedness in high places.” One way or another they yearn to destroy and strive to overturn what has been established. In films, plays, novels, poems, academic theses, tracts, and speeches, sin is praised and customary virtue denigrated. In this so many resemble the old Gnostics—usually without knowing it—that it would

not be untrue to call ours a Gnostic age. The still-admired Jean-Paul Sartre, Weil's contemporary and compatriot, styled the playwright Jean Genet a saint *because* he was a thief. In the last few years we have seen mass murderers and even cannibals presented as tragic heroes not only in fiction but in real life.

In Simone Weil no one sees a figure who is "tragic" in that way, though tragic in other ways her life may have been. She did not deliberately sin; she longed to be "pure." She spoke and wrote fervently about being compassionate and humble. But was she saintly? Leslie Fiedler among many others thought so. Simone Weil, he wrote, "has come to seem more and more a special exemplar of sanctity for our time—the Outsider as Saint in an age of alienation, our kind of saint."

Let us consider this. Here was a well-provided-for, well-educated young woman

who freely chose to regard herself as a slave and to starve herself to death while war raged, hungry children helplessly wasted away in the streets of the Warsaw ghetto, the living skeletons of actual slaves dropped into the dust at Bergen-Belsen, and human bodies were consumed night and day in the ovens of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The young woman in question was a thinker and writer respected even in her own time by intellectuals and leaders of opinion, but she said nothing about these atrocities. She let herself die in 1943 when millions of her fellow Jews were being murdered in the name of the "final solution of the Jewish question," and she who claimed to feel a deep sympathy with the afflicted and even a longing to bear their suffering for them protested only against being classed as one of them. If Fiedler is right that Simone Weil epitomizes the moral ideals of our time, then we are morally adrift in an era of darkness.

Merrill's progress

by Daniel Mark Epstein

James Merrill's *Collected Poems* should be read at the rate the poems were published: a book every four years or so for forty-five years.¹ His language is so rich and elaborate that most of his works require a second reading at once, rewarding the effort more often than not. The poems cannot be consumed in bulk—they need time for reflection, delectation, and, at first, forbearance. Discovering Merrill in this eight-hundred-page collection (which excludes his epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*), a newcomer might put down the heavy book because of its failures; failure blights the early works and the triumphs are slow to come. Yet we cannot wholly appreciate the splendor of Merrill's finest poetry without knowing its origins: it took this poet more than half his career to climb down the ladder of his rhetoric and lie down in what Yeats called "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Of course no one much younger than sixty will ever know the excitement of reading Merrill in his time, discovering this poet in the history that is his and ours. Perhaps this matters less with him than with contemporaries such as Allen Ginsberg and Adrienne Rich, whose poetry so quickly showed its age. Early in his career, James Merrill (1926–1995) declared himself "an enemy of history"—not in any political sense, but meaning that his art, like that of

Mallarmé and Stevens, was made to stand outside of time, and, while using history, might never be used by it.

I am fortunate in having discovered Merrill's poetry in 1967, soon after he won the National Book Award for his collection *Nights and Days*. It prompted me to read *Water Street* (1962), the first work of Merrill's maturity. I had ignored the earlier books, *First Poems* (1951) and *A Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), which had established him as a writer of rare skill, a poet's poet with a coterie of devoted readers. Now, studying the early poems, I am impressed, above all, by the hard-earned progress of his apprenticeship, from a clever artificer of complex amusements to a poet of substance with passion to portray the world around him. His progress from narcissism to magnanimity was painful but certain.

By the late 1960s when the public discovered Merrill's poetry, the writer had only begun the trajectory that would culminate in the great works of his last years. Not everyone was pleased to see him win a prize. During the Vietnam era, there was an assault on rhetoric and artifice in poetry, mounted articulately by Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, and cheered by a host of seductive semi-articulate disciples of Pound and Williams like Ed Dorn and Ted Berrigan. James Merrill, along with Howard Nemerov and Richard Wilbur, was considered the enemy. Of these poets, and others who soon gained

¹ *Collected Poems*, by James Merrill; Alfred A. Knopf, 736 pages, \$65.

notoriety for their “elegance”—Mona Van Duyn, Richard Howard, and Anthony Hecht—Merrill was the most mannered and artificial. In no respectable poet after 1950 do we find so many distortions of natural sentence structure to no purpose, not even the felicities of rhyme.

From glade by river to a further day's
Thirst-crazed hilltop the abandoned cabin
Kept wandering like a mind.
(from "In Nine Sleep Valley")

Many of Merrill's early poems do not sound even remotely like human speech. And though he eventually shed most of his fustian and filigree, he continued to be one of our most mannered and artificial poets until the end of his career.

The early poetry displays the fireworks of a prodigious technique: mastery of metrics and vowel tones, a painter's eye for rendering the complex image, and an allegorist's wit in transforming image to symbol, as in "The Broken Bowl"

The splendid curvings of glass artifice
 Informed its flawlessness
 With lucid unities. Freed from these now,
 Like love it triumphs through inconsequence

Some of the early works are wholly successful and clairvoyantly reveal Merrill's mature voice, poems such as "River Poem," a humble eighteen-line narrative about the poet and a friend watching an old man watch the rowers. While they try to imagine just how much the river view means to the old man, "We knew . . . just how much *he* meant to the river." "For he moved away, leaving us there on the grass/ But the river did not vanish, or not then at least." A simple verbal trick—but nonetheless magical, as the young poet plays upon themes of appearance and reality, mortality and eternity.

Most of early Merrill, however, is decidedly cold. These poems echo his models: Hart Crane, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, and above all Wallace Stevens.

Auden is the most salutary influence, as we see in the tetrameter stanzas of "Poem in Spring."

In good time enough there'll be
No more, dear orphaned love, to see
The trees for the sapped forest, or
Dropped leaves for the brown forest floor.

More often he apes the turgid style of Hart Crane.

The hand with a seagull purpose falls upon
Sand where the beach is barren: through
 clean light
From eye's blue zenith, past seascapes of blue,
Falls on gray sand; yet stencilled in its fall

Against a band of ocean flaked with sunlight.
(from "Accumulations of the Sea")

But foremost it is the voice of Wallace Stevens, the paradoxical, impersonal, and playful strategies of the author of *Harmonium*, that kidnaps the apprentice's verses.

the verb

Of Handel in a starlit attic sounding
The question of how much one ever needs
—Which is high naughtiness in a grave man.
(from “The Grape Cure”)

The early books are loaded with failed Stevens, bungled Crane, and occasional successes in imitation of Marianne Moore, such as "The Peacock."

I speak to the unbeautiful of this bird
That celestially bored
On feet too little under willows trails
Too much of itself, like Proust

Proust will become a central figure in Merrill's pantheon, and useful in understanding the poet—Marcel Proust, whose sensibility (and emotional spectrum) most resembles, in the end, Merrill's own.

Why do Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane dominate Merrill's early poetry? Because

these are the great American poets whose artistry prizes linguistic texture above clarity, sound above sense. In an early interview Merrill confessed that he adored the French symbolists because he was sure he could never understand them. (He must have meant Rimbaud and Mallarmé; Baudelaire, the exemplary classicist, is invariably, radiantly clear, and the mature Merrill often resembles Baudelaire.) The point is that Merrill's love of poetry from the first depended upon the element of mystery, which in his nonage he mistook for incomprehensibility.

Merrill was one of those word-drunk, romantic young writers who believed that somewhere in the riddles of Crane and Stevens and French poets whose foreign music pre-empted reason, somewhere beyond the images and sounds lay transcendental knowledge. He would end up squarely in the tradition of American transcendentalism, in the company of Thoreau, Emerson, and Melville. And, like so many romantic poets (Coleridge, Shelley) obsessed with understanding, if not explaining, the inexplicable, James Merrill in his raids on the inarticulate did not care much for clarity or the reader's response.

There was another cause for Merrill's avoiding clarity in his early verses, one he shared with other gay writers of the 1940s and 1950s. The very title of "Some Negatives: X at the Chateau" indicates Merrill's Crane-like struggle to express what was unspeakable, the dynamics of forbidden love. In order to write about erotic love or homosexual friendship, writers before 1960 sometimes resorted to "encoding" the details of intimacy which—in the case of Hart Crane as well as Merrill—frequently led to language serving as a screen rather than a window upon experience. Why this circumstance leads to obscurity in some authors while allowing a congenial clarity in others, such as Frank O'Hara and Walt Whitman, is a question of personality too broad for this essay. By the 1970s Merrill's lifestyle was no longer a taboo subject. Yet much of his verse remained remote. Central

passages remained inscrutable, prompting us to consider other explanations for his lack of clarity.

The camel's vast thirst is the needle's eye.
Whosoever faithfully
Desires desire more than its object shall
Find his right heaven, be he saint or brute.
(from "Salome")

The first line, which has the ring of a clever epigram (playing upon the verse from Matthew 19:24, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of Heaven") will not surrender its meaning to any amount of literary analysis. It crumbles into absurdity, as do the lines following, which defy not only common sense but the Vedanta, Plato, the Buddha, and St. Paul. Desiring desire is the *enemy* of heaven, pure and simple, and Merrill, who was rich, learned this by and by.

To be blunt, Merrill's early poetry sometimes lacked clarity because he tried to express things he did not understand—boldly, like any good romantic poet; and he was complaisant enough to leave the poem, and his readers, in a muddle. Antecedents of his anaphoric pronouns are maddeningly elusive. And the poet continually addresses a disembodied "you" that is certainly not the reader, probably not a third party, and only possibly the poet himself. This particular subterfuge, which Merrill eventually outgrew, became such a popular costume in the 1960s work of John Ashbery that no poet of the New York School would appear in print without it.

The other trick that Merrill patented to foil his readers I call the squid's retreat: at the end of an otherwise lucid discourse, Merrill concocts a sentence so abstruse it is like a squiggle of ink that blinds us to all that went before. Thus, at the end of "Amsterdam," a poem celebrating the erotic comforts of that liberal city, he writes:

By dark the world is once again intact,

Or so the mirrors, wiped clean, try to
reason . . .
O little moons, misshapen but arisen
To blind with the emotions they refract!

The lines are not inscrutable but opaque. They add little to the poem's clearly developed theme, so well concluded in the penultimate stanza: "Have I become my senses, all else gone?"

Occasionally Merrill could not make himself understood because he did not understand himself, and the abundance of symbolic masks and mirrors in the 1950s attests to an extended adolescent search for identity. A few of these poems succeed in spite of it. In "Mirror" he actually speaks for the looking glass: "I grow old under an intensity of questioning looks." The anthropomorphized mirror poignantly describes the household and the people it confronts:

A fine young man
Rides by on horseback. Now the door shuts.
Hester
Confides in me her first unhappiness.
This much, you see, would never have been
fitted
Together but for me. Why then is it
They more and more neglect me?

At last the aging mirror feels itself disintegrating: "How superficial/ Appearances are!" it exclaims, going blind, feeling the silver flaking from its surface. Merrill, the lyric poet, is an observer of life rather than an active participant. He is the lonely mirror his art is holding up to life.

It is a flawed, funhouse mirror, unreliably reflecting the world until the 1960s, when the thirty-five-year-old poet began, shyly at first, to tell us the story of his life. Merrill's actual biography is well known, and well told elsewhere, by himself in *A Different Person* (1993) and by his friend the novelist Alison Lurie in a recent memoir, *Familiar Spirits* (2001). His father Charles was one of the founders of Merrill, Lynch & Co., the brokerage firm. His second wife, James's

mother, was the beautiful and charming Hellen Ingram. Charles philandered, the parents divorced in 1939 when Jimmie was twelve, and the sensitive child never got over the trauma.

Mencken called poets "cases of arrested development," a gross generalization that stubbornly vexes us nearly a century later. Freud finds the neurotic personality arrested at some early moment of trauma that one may or may not dissolve through psychoanalytic catharsis. Poetry would change Merrill in ways that psychoanalysis could not.

A trust fund left him rich as a duke. He might have idled away his years as so many legatees have done. Instead he studied, travelled, underwent psychoanalysis, created a charitable foundation, and produced an astonishing body of poetry, prose, and drama that could only have come of the most arduous and unstinting effort. He was devoted to the language, to his mother, and to his friends and family, in that order, an order that he honors scrupulously in his poetry.

As Scott Fitzgerald once said, the very rich are not like you and me. Not only do they have more money, they are also often relieved of social pressures that bear upon the rest of us. They do not have to seek company, they are courted. If they complain that their wealth isolates them, it is still their choice. They do not have to speak until they are spoken to; then when they choose to converse, they are never long without an audience. Hellen Merrill, who doted upon her Jimmie, reminded the boy daily that he was different, "a different person," because of his wealth, his brains, his sensitivity, and his social position. Of course well-meaning parents want their children to know that they are "special." But Merrill's mother may have convinced her son that he was not quite mortal—that he was a species of archangel or space alien. As the title of his autobiography suggests, he never quite got over that, either.

As a consequence he was painfully uncomfortable with himself, writing in

"Walking All Night" (circa 1955) "I do not love myself" and in a long suite of poems about sexual ambivalence "The Thousand and Second Night" (circa 1964) "I am afraid/ I was not human either—ah, who is?" A curious stance for a poet, finding common cause with the rest of humanity in his inhumanity.

Yet he was so gifted, from the first, that he would attract knowledgeable readers who were satisfied with the beauty of a poem's surface. These did not care so much about the content of the verses so long as their imagery was dazzling. Later, when Merrill decided to dilate upon his experiences in narrative poems, at his worst he droned on and on like a garrulous countess in Proust, with little regard for his reader's attention, confident that no one would dare to yawn or leave the room. This is the quintessential poetry of privilege, and I do not mean this disparagingly. At its best Merrill's poetry is magnificent, and it could not have been written by a man without his advantages.

When Merrill's *Selected Poems* came out in 1982, I recall conversations with readers who agreed that the poems were uncommonly well wrought but, for the most part, remote, lacking in affect. Today, I seriously doubt if those same people would say that the poems after 1976 suffered from too little emotion. Thereby hangs a tale.

In *The Farewell Symphony*, Edmund White's *roman à clef*, a famous poet, gay, a millionaire, offers a new poem, dedicated to his goddaughter, for the critical appraisal of two literary friends. They put their heads together over the long, elaborate allegory. And at last they ask the poet: "Isn't it . . . a bit . . . cold?" The poet slaps his forehead and sheepishly replies, "Of course! I forgot to put the feeling in!" He rushes upstairs, fiddles with the poem for an hour, and descends to read them "lines that made us weep, so tender were they." The calculating poet is James Merrill, and the poem, thinly disguised, is the sublime "Verse for Urania," from *Divine Comedies* (1976), a pivotal work.

Like Robert Frost, James Merrill in his forties developed a narrative gift to match his lyric genius. He began to deliver his stories with careful regard not only for linguistic precision but also for the attention and engagement of his readers. It would be convenient if we could fix upon a single poem like "Verse for Urania" as a watershed to illustrate this change. But it is not so simple. Scattered throughout Merrill's early works are narrative poems, like the anthology piece "Charles on Fire," where the subject (his friends) and the theme (personal beauty and vanity) overwhelm the artist's emotional defenses. And in *The Fire Screen* (1969) we find the gripping dramatic monologue "Kostas Tympakianakis," about a young welder whose brother was mutilated by Greek terrorists, and "Matinees," a ballad in which the poet recalls the amoral influence of opera on a small boy.

The poem often regarded as a turning point is "The Broken Home" (circa 1965). In this narrative lyric Merrill confronts his parents' divorce and its moral effect upon him.

How intensely people used to feel!
Like metal poured at the close of a
 proletarian novel,
Refined and glowing from the crucible,
I see those two hearts, I'm afraid,
Still. Cool here in the graveyard of good
 and evil,
They are even so to be honored and obeyed.

. . . Obeyed, at least, inversely. Thus
I rarely buy a newspaper, or vote.
To do so, I have learned, is to invite
The tread of a stone guest within my house.

Here is the beginning of an authorial intimacy. But not until *Braving the Elements* (1972) does Merrill master the art of narrative poetry. In this volume and the others that follow before his death in 1995, Merrill produces an autobiography in verse (with occasional lapses and longueurs) that has few equals in our literature. The books show steady advances in clarity, intimacy

and emotional impact. Teaching Merrill, one might be tempted to begin with his last book and work backward to 1972, but the poetry is better served by the close analysis of a few pieces in chronological order that may, however sketchily, illustrate Merrill's artistry in full flower.

In the rich tapestry of *Braving the Elements* are several poems that penetrate the mystery of friendship, a mystery that confounded the artist during his youth. "Strato in Plaster" is among the best, a vivid portrait of an Athenian contractor, once handsome, whose godlike beauty, as well as his devotion to Merrill, has faded with the years, until "The God in him is a remembered one." Strato has broken an arm, which, in Merrill's allegory, represents the wounded friendship. In the last lines Merrill asks if the break was caused by too much drink? "No such luck," says Strato. "One day like this the scaffold gave beneath me. I felt no pain at first." It is Merrill's absolute confidence in his meaning that allows the symbol to shine here, casting its distinct shadows.

And in this crucial book the poet included "Days of 1935," the first of several autobiographical ballads with similar titles that examine incidents or themes in the poet's personal history. No one since Auden had used the ballad form so comfortably, effectively, and inventively. "Days of 1935," in seventy-six swift quatrains, sets a standard that only Merrill himself may have since surpassed. It is a kidnapping fantasy.

On the Lindbergh baby's small
Cold features lay a spell, a swoon.
It seemed entirely plausible
For my turn to come soon,

For a masked and crouching form
Lithe as a tiger, light as a moth,
To glide toward me, clap a firm
Hand across my mouth,

Then sheer imagination ride
Off with us in its old jalopy,

Trailing bedclothes like a bride
Timorous but happy.

The rich kid, terrified, perversely wants to be kidnapped, taken away from the cell of privilege where he is held hostage by wealth, breeding, and by parents who do not love him or each other as they all need to be loved. His sexually charged, hilarious fantasy about his abductors sounds a universal chord while illuminating his own feelings during the time of his parents' divorce.

The ballad stanza, swelled by pentameter, is also the natural choice for the two-part poem "Up and Down," which juxtaposes the themes of erotic friendship and maternal love. In the first part, "Snow King Chair Lift," the adventure of rising up a mountainside in an "iron love seat" becomes an allegory for the ecstasy, risk, and irrationality of a love affair. "Oh, I've had it up to here, fiftieth story," he cries.

Glass maze, ice cube, daybreak's inflammatory
Montage subsiding into vertigo

Till, with their elevations all on file,
Joys, now demolished, that I used to live in,
This afternoon I swear halfway to heaven
None housed me—no, not style itself—in style.

The second part, "The Emerald," takes the poet from the giddy alpine heights to the depths of a Manhattan bank vault. He has gone there with his mother on a mysterious errand after the death of his stepfather. In some of the most touching lines in all of Merrill, he describes his mother rummaging through a safe deposit box and putting on the exquisite jewelry that Charles, "Jimmie's" father, had given her. "Her face gone queerly lit, fair, young,/ Like faces of our dear ones who have died." She finds an emerald ring Charles had given her when Jimmie was born, and offers it to him: "For your bride, it's yours." He cannot tell her what he's thinking.

Indeed this green room's mine, my very life.

*We are each other's; there will be no wife;
The little feet that patter here are metrical.*

He slips the ring onto her finger. "Wear it for me, I silently entreat. . . . Our eyes meet. The world beneath the world is brightening."

And brighten it does, that "world beneath the world," i.e., the realm of poetry and the spirit, now that he has made peace with himself and in the process taken a new interest in the rest of us, his friends and readers.

Merrill's poetry was not yet entirely free of aimless digression. That did not come until 1982, after he had talked himself hoarse over the ouija board, writing his epic. Two of the more ambitious (and famous) poems in *Divine Comedies*, "Chimes for Yahya" and "Yannina," end beautifully after tedious maundering. "Yannina," which juxtaposes the charisma of a Turkish prince with the memory of the poet's own father, is deeply felt, but it wanders all over Greek history before gathering its figures—the magician's woman sawed in half, the dove, the lion—for its attack upon the theme: "partings hurt although we dip the pain/ Into a glowing well—the pen I mean."

But the mastery of "Verse for Urania," a long, impassioned meditation and prayer upon his goddaughter's baptism, proves that he has gained the emotional freedom and generosity characteristic of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He has become not only a romantic in philosophy, but a romantic in temperament. The carefully plotted poem begins as the godfather naps on the top floor of Urania's home, thinking of the preparations for the post-baptismal party: "The lamb will have cooled nicely in its fat now,/ Cake been iced to match the souvenir/ Rosettes (two ribbons with your name and mine),/ Whiskey and set-ups set up like tenpins." He muses on the child's fate, her transformation from pagan to Christian, and the astrological meaning of her name. His affection for the girl and her parents beams in every line of the poem, but

without sentimentality. "A propos of ages," says the poet, alluding to Virgil's fourth eclogue, "Let this one of mine you usher in/ Bending still above your crib enthralled,/ Godchild, be lightly taken, life and limb,/ By rosy-fingered flexings as by a flame." The rosy-fingered dawn is soon to break, bringing to completion a complex architectural figure that has been building since the first verses. "Our ups and downs meant so much more/ Than the usual tralala from floor to floor./ Now I was seeing double—which was which?" When the party is over, and it is time for the poet to go up to bed, he is for a moment uncertain whether he is an old man or a child as innocent as his goddaughter. A song of Purcell on the phonograph brings him back to himself. Merrill has become the perfect, rich godfather, godfather not only to Urania but to a generation of poetry lovers.

Our bond was sacred, being secular:
In time embedded, it in us, near, far,
Flooding both levels with the same sunrise.

Emerging from the sea of his "magisterial" (to quote the book jacket) epic, in 1985 Merrill published *Late Settings*, a volume of amphibious poems steeped in water imagery. "Waves, as your besetting/ Depth-wish recedes,/ I'm surfacing, I'm home!" (from "Island in the Works"). He picks up his autobiography where it left off, in the balladlike sonnet sequence "Days of 1941 and '44," a thrilling and poignant portrait of a high school bully who tormented the sensitive Jimmie in "the nightmare shower room."

Rich boy you called me. True, there'd be no
turning
Back from the mixed blessings of a first-rate
Education exquisitely offset
By an inbred contempt for learning.

The War separates, then unites them as, after years of nursing his hatred, Merrill somehow learns to empathize, upon hearing that his fellow soldier has died in battle.

"The nothing you'd become took on a weight/ No style I knew could lighten." This is Merrill at his best, the net of his rhetoric capturing an essential, slippery theme: The enemy he has long feared and loathed was always an emanation of himself; in time he has learned to embrace it.

Merrill wrote such a variety of excellent lyric and narrative poems in his last decade, it is difficult to choose among them. Facing each other in *Late Settings* are two autobiographical lyrics that confront the injustices of class: "The Help" and "Domino." In the first he sketches thumbnail portraits of the African-American servants in his parents' house, "shiftless Beulah with her fan," "James Madison, who chauffeured the sedan," and the loving nurse Emma. "Her arms around me, I knew my place."

Father and mother, side by side tonight
Lax as dolls in your lit showcase,
Where are those poor souls now? Did they
see right
Into our hearts at last, and know their place?

In "Domino" he turns his monocle upon himself:

Delicious, white, refined
Is all that I was raised to be,
Whom feeling for the word
Plus crystal rudiments of mind
Still keep—however stirred—
From wholly melting in the tea.

And in "Bronze," a complex narrative poem of more than three-hundred lines, the poet uses the 1972 discovery of two bronze sculptures in the Mediterranean (male figures, ancient Greek originals) to bring together several stories—an old Italian friend's heroism in World War II, Merrill's unravelling affair with David Jackson, the poet's struggle with his art, and a contemporary sculptor's murder by his sons. Like all great narrative poetry, "Bronze" defies synopsis. The poet's voice alternates with the imagined voices of the bronze figures, who eerily deliver dactylic prophecies from

the lost world: "Nature/ Is dead, or soon will be. And we/ Are well out of it, who in the tempest—/ Exultantly baring through coppery/ Lips the carnivorous silver—/ Knew best how to throw around weight/ And go overboard." The poet himself exists in bronze, a bust made of him at age six by a man later axed by his two sons. "Had they/ Also posed for him,/ Two trustful little boys . . . ?" Art, like life and love, is a perilous enterprise, as our subjects threaten to take their vengeance. Read "Bronze," re-read it, and then move on to *A Scattering of Salts* (1995).

Like most of Merrill's later books, his last—published posthumously, prepared by him—begins with an *amuse-gueule*, a little palate cleanser of a lyric to charm us before serving up more sumptuous fare. In this case the opener "A Downward Look" also serves as a bookend, whose counterpart "An Upward Look" closes *A Scattering of Salts*. Both poems wrestle with mortality. The first one is playful, likening one's life to a long luxurious bath that ends when, unexpectedly, "a wrinkled baby hand/ Happens upon the plug." The final poem is humorless but ends on an opulent image of regeneration: "First the grave dissolving into dawn/ then the crucial recrystallizing/ from inmost depths of clear dark blue."

In this ultimate book, written in the shadow of death, Merrill delivers, clearly, without coyness and with a minimum of cleverness, essential statements about his life and art, the wisdom it has taken him years to gather and a lifetime to surrender. It is all that we could have hoped for. Ringing changes on Baudelaire, in "To the Reader" he writes, balancing vanity and humility:

Anyhow, your final thought tonight
Before you kiss my picture and turn the
light out,
Is of a more exemplary life begun
Tomorrow, truer, harder to get right.

In a tribute to his friend Elizabeth Bishop, he praises her thus:

In living as in poetry, your art
Refused to tip the scale of being human
By adding unearned weight.

And quickly he scolds himself for writing a prolix sentence: "but there, I've done it./ Added the weight." Balance had always been a problem for Merrill, knowing exactly how much information a poem could bear without collapsing. Now he is doing all he can to lighten his storm-tormented craft. It is part of the effort to become more human. In a self-portrait he paraphrases Pascal: "For while we humans aren't/ Countable as equals, we must behave/ As if they were, or the spirit dies." And he is determined to keep the spirit alive.

One of the most powerful poems in the book, a work in which Merrill achieves the classical perfection of Baudelaire, is the thirty-two-line narrative "Quatrains for Pegasus." Here the poet returns to the mother lode that supplied so many of his best verses, his golden, haunted childhood in Manhattan. Little Jimmie and Nanny McGrath go to the park to marvel at four stone horses that seem to come alive at the stroke of nine as an attendant turns on the fountains. "Jets like fireworks rocketed/ In four directions, as though from the horses' brows."

I wondered if passing through a white horse's
head

Was curing the municipal water for good
Of its butts and tinfoil? . . .
Would the process also
Help Nanny's bad hip, make me a good boy,

And keep—for each morning brought fresh
horrors—
Our whole world from starving like the
Armenians,

Its bones from coming to light like the
Lindbergh baby's . . . ?

Panicked, the sensitive child wants to ask his Nanny if the horses might miraculously save the world, but he cannot trust her. "The more she said, the wickeder the world got./ Don't let it, I begged the horses, get any worse." The way the poem's syllabic rhythm builds to this climax is sheer sorcery.

In a twelve-part poem based upon his visit to a friend drying out at a "twelve-step ranch," Merrill satirically deflates his life-long sense of uniqueness. Mimicking the sanatorium director's farewell speech, he says "since you obviously/ Made the effort to attend Family Week,/ We hope that we have shown you just how much/ You have in common with everybody else." The irony is that the more Merrill had in common with the rest of us, the greater and more unique his poetry became.

MANTEL CLOCK, IMITATION SEVRES

Time, passing, glances at the clock
Perhaps with pity—who's to say?
Still rose and ormolu, its hands
Clasped in dismay . . .

"Stay then, thou art so fair," he smiles
To put the pretty thing at ease.
"I will, *I have*," the latter sighs.
"Now what, please?"

Teach me to tick without the touch
I took my life from—ah, those years!"
It's dusk; the dial brims with faint
Firefly tears.

The arbiter reviews a face
Flawless in its partial knowing:
"Child, think well of me, or try.
I must be going."

Three poems

by William Logan

Bank voles at Trinity College, Cambridge

At first the damp leaves
rustled with the thought
of unharvested sheaves
and undergrads untaught,

the myrtle greens, the browns
of soggy paper bags
or satin May Ball gowns
lacking designer tags.

Startled like a fear,
the stubby, red-haired mouse
showed its tufted rear
above a weed-choked house,

taking a nervous pause
beneath the shadowy leaf,
unworried by the cause
of rage, despair, or grief,

or sins that separate
man from a mouse so wary,
our rough but certain fate
in Eden's bestiary.

Through the star-crossed town
each boy with pink champagne
escorted a brilliant gown
down a college lane.

Love places us in a line
stretching back to the fish
that left the womb's warm brine
for the land's gibberish,

but no man comprehends
the reason of his birth,
or that he'll lie in the end
beneath the weedy earth,

where the common vole,
a sacrificial pawn,
intends to be small but whole
some generations on.

Odalisque

And so she took off her shirt, all
in one motion, pausing
to make her hesitation an act of modesty,
yet immodest. We had not had

an affair, and could never have an affair.
It was not that she was not beautiful,
though she wasn't, and not that I
didn't know the desire of other men

to sleep with her. The Atlantic
lay in the harbor, fusing its blue disorders
to the light slatted through blinds,
the light that barred her breasts.

They were, need I say, nearly perfect.
I saw how proud she was of them,
proud too of their effect on men,
and I knew I wasn't the first man

before whom, in one sinuous motion,
she had stripped off her shirt.
It made her vulnerable, that mute beauty,
thinking no man who saw her naked

could control his desire. Even after
I had refused her, she had been unable to stop.
She looked away, as if in shyness,
to let me watch her as she wished to be watched.

Then she put on her other shirt.
When I saw her recently, twenty years
had passed, and those years cruel
to women, even women you love.

An ordinary afternoon in New Haven

It was Valentine's Day, a blind date,
and on the sidewalk, angry since I was late,
she sat astride the leather suitcase,
chainsmoking, frowning, wearing a lace
camisole, her blonde hair tied in a band.
I gave her my hand.

There followed the dizzy abbreviated spring
we were in love, flattering
our nervous unhardened animal
natures, knowing more the rise than fall
of love, or what we named love, having no better word.
Virgins are of course absurd,

say those who have forgotten the rest,
the French curve of a teenage breast

and all the destruction that follows, in bed.
Blossoms marked the spring of the dead,

the war stalled in the jungles of Vietnam,
the arrowy flights of SAM

missiles through the newspaper half-tone,
and, each night, her throaty voice on the phone.

Then she was gone, pregnant, to another life
from which she called years later, wife,

mother, unhappy in her tract house, wanting
something that could be no more than haunting.

What if we *had* exchanged rings,
bought station wagon, barbeque, a hundred things

for that life she knew the blueprint of
in the dull, resistant suburb of love?

How soon would I have packed to go?
I think of her sometimes. I don't know.

Theater

Bogeymen and aspirates

by Mark Steyn

With hindsight, Susan Smith made a big mistake blaming the abduction of her two children on “a black man.” He had, supposedly, a gun and a plaid shirt, and he hijacked her Mazda with the boys inside. Nine days later, after a nationwide manhunt, Mrs. Smith confessed to the killings, and her sons and the vehicle were retrieved from a South Carolina lake. But by then the damage was done.

Had she merely murdered her own children, she might have earned the same support enjoyed by Andrea Yates, the infanticidal pin-up gal whose drowning of her five children last year has prompted a glittery nationwide “Defence Fund” plus the backing of NOW, Katie Couric, Marie Osmond, and many others who think this particular serial killer has done a wonderful job of shining a light on some of the problems of “post-partum depression.” Alas, Mrs. Smith blamed a fictional African-American and so proclaimed herself not just a child-killer, which is one thing, but also a racist, which is quite another. Victim culture only works if the various identity groups respect each other’s turf. In 1994, when Mrs. Smith rolled her Mazda into the John D. Long Lake, she was sailing into uncharted waters and perhaps is not to be blamed for failing to anticipate this.

Now, eight years on, the case has washed up off-Broadway in a form not to Smith’s advantage. *Brutal Imagination*, at the Vineyard, is a play about the Smith case but not

about Smith. It’s a two-hander, and the star role is that of Mister Zero, the nonexistent black bogeyman on whom she pinned the murders and whose actual existence the police and press allegedly took for granted. Almost immediately, there were calls from “witnesses” who claimed to have seen the homicidal African-American at gas stations and convenience stores. The poet Cornelius Eady and the composer Deidre Murray have now brought this phantom to life and given us a droll conceit: a two-handed fictional work based on real events whose protagonist is a fictional character invented by the real character. Mister Zero is cool and sardonic about the rich detail of the many imagined sightings:

Mr. Hugh Hickson now knows he heard
The tires of the car
Everyone is looking for
Crush the gravel
As I pulled up
In the wee, wee hours
At the motel where
He works the night desk.

Eady’s text was originally published as a cycle of poems, then set to music, and now staged. He never went to Union, SC to check out the turf. He knew what he wanted from this slice of Southern Gothic, and he runs with it. *Brutal Imagination* is about what it’s like to be “a stray thought, a solution. The scariest face you could think

of?" I think he's wrong about the police falling for the story. By all accounts, the Union County Sheriff, Howard Wells, quickly spotted the inconsistencies in Smith's statements early on, and devised a strategy for bluffing her into confession. Likewise, the LAPD concluded pretty quickly that OJ Simpson was their man. As to the wider pathology, that cuts both ways, too. Many—though not all—citizens of Union took Smith at her word: for one thing, the alternative was too ghastly to contemplate. But, after OJ's acquittal, vast numbers of black Americans—a majority, according to some 1995 polls—continued to believe there was a "real killer" out there—probably white—in the face of forensic evidence that made such a possibility all but impossible. If you want evidence of profound cultural irrationality, that outpunches Susan Smith's week-long wild goose chase any day.

That said, one of the reasons why I preferred *The National Enquirer's* OJ coverage to *The New York Times's* is because the former stuck doggedly to pertinent matters like the bloody glove and the whereabouts of the missing knife—stuff that requires a reporter to get his shoes a little muddy—while the latter couldn't wait to transform the story into cheap symbolism, thereby enabling its stellar essayists to ponder endlessly the fall of a black role model and its larger import for the African-American community. Dead bodies? Who cares? Bring on the metaphorical significance! So months before anyone had ever heard of Johnnie Cochran, the respectable press had played the race card. Even Cochran's comparison of the LAPD to Adolf Hitler doesn't seem so ridiculous when you consider that one early *Times* piece on OJ managed to drag in Norman Mailer, Jean Genet, Dos- toevsky, Milton, Shakespeare, and Sophocles.

Something of the same fatal lapse into lamebrain symbolism seems to have happened to *Brutal Imagination*: a very particular story, fascinating on its own (one would have thought), has slipped into the

swamp of generality. Mister Zero is the black stereotype du jour—though, leaving aside comparative homicide rates, the image of the African-American as gangsta of the white imagination owes at least as much to black rap groups and black film-makers. In this play, Susan Smith's apparition becomes her conscience and confessor, the two characters yoked together in dueling dialogue with rare moments of somber eloquence:

The lake has no appetite
But it takes the car slowly
Swallow by swallow, like a snake.

But, by midway through this seventy-five-minute song cycle, Mister Zero is comparing himself to earlier stereotypes—to Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, Stepin Fetchit. The scene is a tour de force for Joe Morton, a spirited actor whose impersonations, even at their most gleeful, convey the pain beneath. Yet around this point you find yourself wondering just who's doing the stereotyping: I can't remember the last time I saw the real Uncle Tom—as in the protagonist of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a play unlikely ever to be revived on Broadway in my lifetime—but I've seen endless ironic deconstructions of him in any number of contemporary black plays. He and Aunt Jemima don't illuminate the specifics of the situation, they reduce it to an abstract. Not every black play needs Uncle Tom and Stepin Fetchit. Some material is quite interesting enough all by itself. As Eady sees it, here was a black man who held the nation agog for nine days, even though he didn't exist. Nobody saw him, and somehow everybody saw him. He was merely the latest model of white America's black bogeyman:

When called, I come.
My job is to get things done.

Unfortunately, this is Eady's only thought, restate it though he might a thousand different ways. *Brutal Imagination* suffers from a lack of dramatic imagination,

from a failure to make drama out of the conceit. Mark Wendland's design is ingenious, a world upended, so that the two-lane blacktop runs across the theater's ceiling, the dark surface of the lake shimmering where the sky should be. Seen from this dizzyingly disorienting perspective, why shouldn't black be white or vice versa? The yellow lights that create the road markings snake into the distance, suggesting a road movie of the mind, a wild ride in Susan Smith's head with Mister Zero by her side. But the road movie never goes anywhere. Murray's music is cool and jazzy and unforced, but also static and commentative, more interested in hanging out than in pushing plot point or revealing character. And even a brisk seventy-five minutes is long enough to make you aware of how much else is missing, not least the real people—Mrs. Smith, her three-year-old, his fourteen-month-old brother, the dad from whom mom had separated only a month earlier, citing adultery. My memories of the Smith case are hazy now—it was a messy split, there was something about an abortion from which she'd never fully recovered. If you want wider social issues, there are plenty to pick from. But not racism. The police would have launched the same manhunt if she'd fingered some stump-toothed white-trash loser. And there's something almost willfully callous—or at least uncaring—about a dramatist who ignores all the real drama in order to pursue an obsession. What happens at the Vineyard is that the fictional black man finally pulls off the abduction he never committed in 1994: eight years on, he hijacks Smith and her sons and steals their story out from under them. Susan Smith is played by Sally Murphy and winds up a cipher. Diane Paulus directs, but with little sense of how to imbue a low-key musical meditation with the crackle of human action.

Further Than The Furthest Thing (at the Manhattan Theatre Club) is also based on recent history. In the British Imperial imagination, Tristan da Cunha is known as

"the furthest thing" because it's the remotest place on earth, the world's most isolated human settlement. A small island plunked in the chilly South Atlantic midway between Argentina and South Africa, Tristan is the opposite of those balmy tropic paradises round the other side of the globe in the Pacific. Life is as unbalmy, atropic, and non-paradisical as you can get. Last year, a hurricane devastated the place and no one in the outside world heard a thing about it because it took out the island's only radio link. The storm blew sheep into the ocean, killed many cattle, damaged every single home on the island, demolished the hospital and community center, blew the roof off the radio station, and wrecked the Albatross, the only pub in the only village, Edinburgh of the Seven Seas. For a week after the storm, the entire island was without electricity.

And nobody in the rest of the world knew a thing about it! Not the island's colonial masters in London. Not the Governor, who doesn't actually reside there but prefers to live 1,260 miles away on St. Helena, Tristan da Cunha's nearest neighbor. (St. Helena is Manhattan to Tristan's Weehawken, New Jersey.) Even in good times, the island's contact with the rest of humanity is limited to one annual visit from a British supply vessel, plus the occasional cruise ship, which anchors offshore when it's safe to do so.

Now that's living off the grid.

The East India Company won a charter to settle Tristan in 1658, and it's been a Crown colony since 1834, populated by the descendants of little more than a handful of shipwrecked sailors from the Scottish borders. There are just seven surnames on the island: Glass, Green, Hagan, Lavarello, Repetto, Rogers, and Swain. All 290 residents turned up in England forty years ago, when the island's volcano erupted and they were evacuated to the mother country. They made an unforgettable impression—the metropolitan power's Anglo-Celtic kith and kin but, with their Victorian garb and bizarre patois, far more exotic than the

duskiest Hottentots, and utterly lost in the roaring traffic's boom and the glitter of urbanity. The old temptation—"How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Patee?"—posed no difficulty for the islanders. They voted to return home, to their island—though even getting there was tricky, as the landing dock was covered in lava. Today the colony is virtually self-sufficient in food and has a reasonably thriving economy based on crawfish and selling its commemorative postage stamps to overseas philatelists.

Like Cornelius Eady and Union, SC, the author of this play, Zinnie Harris, has never been to Tristan. But she has a strong personal connection: her grandfather was an Anglican minister on the island and, though he died before she was born, Miss Harris grew up with the family photograph albums and her mother's retelling of his tales of Tristan in the local dialect. "H'england" is "England", and also "English": the islanders speak of taking a cup of H'england tea. The h'outside world is of little interest to them: they are an aspirate culture not an aspirant one. The documentary elements are well researched, and the language, with its curious word orders, tenses, and sentence structures, conveys an odd dignity on the characters. As the play opens, Mill Lavarello (Jenny Sterlin) greets her nephew Francis Swain (Dan Futterman), returning to the island after a spell in South Africa:

Been waiting. Since sun is first come up. I's seeing your ship from the first it was. I's hold-ing my breath for the rocks. Shutting my eyes for the corner. Counting my heart's beating as in it came.

Miss Harris's play made a modest splash in London, opening at the National and subsequently reprised at the Tricycle. Its first American production brings it under much greater scrutiny: there are no historical links, no living ties of Queen and Commonwealth, between Tristan and the US to distract us; it stands or falls as a play. "*Further Than The Furthest Thing* owes much to

the Tristan islanders and their story," writes the author in the program. "However the story is not solely their own and departs from accurate documentation almost immediately. In many ways I stole the real Tristan da Cunha to feed my imagination, and emerged gorged, to write into existence a host of characters and events that never happened."

Yes, but. It's not so much that that's an odd argument to make when you've gone to the trouble of giving your characters the same surnames as the real Tristan families but that, as in *Brutal Imagination*, every departure from the actual events and people makes the story somehow more ordinary.

Francis, for example, has returned with jolly Mr. Hansen (Peter Gerety), the owner of a Cape Town jar factory with plans to open similar on Tristan for the purposes of bottling and exporting the local crawfish. Would such a scenario attract even the most rapacious capitalist? It took oil to get anyone even remotely interested in the Falklands. In Tuvalu, they had to lease their under-utilized telephone exchange and internet address for phone-sex and porn websites. The problem for the world's remote places is that the capitalist exploiter beloved of our drama so rarely shows up. Undeterred, the play presses on dingling the usual alarm bells as, like the dopier citizens of River City listening to Professor Harold Hill, Mill falls head over heels with Mr. Hansen's utopian vision of a world she has never known—a factory with a cafeteria, nameplates for the staff, and "h'uniforms." Like children at a *Peter Pan* matinee, we have to restrain ourselves from pointing out that the crocodile's already ticking.

Mill is married to Bill (Robert Hogan), builder of the church and de facto pastor, who has heard strange rumblings while swimming. Francis's childhood sweetheart is Rebecca Rogers (Jennifer Dundas), whom he now finds pregnant with another man's child. Maybe it's something to do with the way she likes to hang out at the volcano! Meanwhile, some "pinnawin

h'eggs" have been broken, which means bad luck. The island is deep in dark secrets, pagan rituals, diabolic pacts. The plot never misses an opportunity to thicken. By the time the volcano erupts as the First Act finale, it seems almost a minor detail, lost in a sea of complications.

In other words, Miss Harris is reducing an extraordinary event—a remote island's entire population relocated to one of the most advanced and congested societies on earth—to something generic: just another play about an isolated community peopled with stock characters who rub awkwardly up against the modern world. Act Two begins a year later, 1962, in Southampton, England, where the islanders have been evacuated and found employment at a factory owned by . . . Mr. Hansen! Why, fancy that! A South African jar manufacturer with interests in both the United Kingdom and Tristan da Cunha! Who'd've thought it! Even more conveniently, Bill now toils in the factory's boiler room, thereby ensuring some literal symmetry when the plot reaches its climax and he himself boils over. It turns out that there was a dark reason behind the sudden rash of baptisms fifteen years earlier.

Oh, and let's not forget that Her Majesty's Government is plotting to stiff the islanders and use Tristan for nuclear testing.

Despite the language, despite the observational details, despite the real names, we're now deep into parodic melodrama pitting a simple homespun peasantry against a dark shadowy military-industrial-colonial complex. Just as Cornelius Eady was unable to resist the familiar template of the contemporary black play, so, far away in Scotland, Miss Harris was unable to eschew the standard obsessions of the contemporary National Theatre play. If she couldn't visit Tristan, she might at least have dropped in on England for a couple of days—for, after the Act One travelogue, Act Two is a cartoon of stale agitprop.

As with *Brutal Imagination*, the design

hints at a better play lying somewhere within the subject matter. Bobby Tilley II and Laura Bauer dress their cast in frock coats and embroidered skirts, wing collars and heavy sweaters, as if they'd bought a grab-bag at a Merchant-Ivory yard sale. The cast starts out bringing an appealing naïveté to their characters and then hunkers down in a grimly earnest manner entirely at odds with the vast sweep of British Imperial history: on Tristan da Cunha, laughs seem to be banned by gubernatorial fiat or a directive of the Colonial Office. Jenny Sterlin reprising Mill from London is engaging, but she suffers from the unhelpful tic of having to say everything three or four times. Peter Gerety hints at a humanity to Mr. Hansen that the writing never quite justifies. But there never was a Cape Town exploiter, or secret atomic plans, or human sacrifice, or any of the other themes that the author tosses at the play like marshmallows hoping that one will stick. Miss Harris's director, Neil Pepe, takes the piece at face value and indulges his author's heavy hand at every opportunity.

The play does a great disservice to the islanders in portraying them not just as ingrown and backward but as weak and passive. After last year's hurricane, London offered Tristan £75,000 to repair the communications equipment and pay for a new hospital. (You can build a hospital for under \$120,000? Amazing.) Till then, the islanders are doing what they usually do: making the best of things. Instead of just waiting for the new hospital, they arranged to buy a second-hand X-ray machine and hitched it a ride on the next South African fishing vessel which rushed it out to them in a couple of months. These are not the people we meet on stage. In *Further Than The Furthest Thing*, Zinnie Harris has used Tristan da Cunha as a peg for metropolitan preoccupations; in *Brutal Imagination*, Cornelius Eady has used Susan Smith as a peg for his own preoccupations. In both cases, a brutal lack of imagination would seem to be the problem.

Dance

Petipaw

by *Laura Jacobs*

In his New York apartment, George Balanchine had an Audubon print of a bald eagle. It was in his living room; you can see it in the famous photographs of Balanchine playing with his cat Mourka. In these photos the cat is in the air, fully stretched yet twisting in the middle, utterly rapt yet strangely relaxed—not unlike Fred Astaire snapped between steps. Balanchine is often crouched lower than the cat, urging it on, as if coaching a dancer in a complicated *jeté en tournant*. Behind them, perched in profile, is the eagle. It is a wonderful trio—cat, raptor, choreographer—all three evolved in the same direction, with the same physiological assets: sharp eyes that miss nothing, trap-like claws for catching life, and senses attuned to sound, smell, movement, gesture. For these three creatures seeing and hearing are kinetic acts, a wiring beneath and beyond thought.

Balanchine died in 1983, but even when he was alive it seemed unfair to measure other choreographers against him. Frederick Ashton and Antony Tudor were great artists (the influence of Tudor's early *Lilac Garden* on Balanchine's late *Davidstündlertänze* is a fascinating bit of shadow play, a nod of homage better late than never). But in the sheer breadth and amplitude of Balanchine's gifts, even these geniuses were brought down a notch. To hold Balanchine as a point of comparison for today's choreographers is still more and rather wildly unfair. Gen X, Y, and Z have loads (or maybe I should say, downloads) of information, but no ex-

perience of the wide world their predecessors knew (Kerouac's "road" is now Microsoft's "highway"). And yet, what can we do? There is no escaping Balanchine as a standard. The deep and palpable dimensionality of his ballets, that sense of invisible architecture popping up before our eyes, of landscapes teeming with growing, breathing things—in short, his glorious, continuous exploration of what a ballet can be and do—all this seems lost on youngsters making their first, second, and third works for New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater. In the last few years, ballets premiered at these companies have been so flat and faceless and monotonal and dimensionless that the word "premiere" has begun to seem more punishment than promise.

The late critic David Daniel, when he could be dragged to the theater to see something new (or was told over the phone about a recent dubious effort), loved to purr ominously, "it's the end of civilization as we know it." Pushed for analysis, he fixed on the television screen as the great reductive force in American culture. There it was, shaped like a stage—a box—but without any depth or life, in fact, a vacuum. It was insanely quixotic, commercial breaks every five minutes. And most damaging, instead of being larger than life, scaled for wonder, it was very much smaller. To the teat of television, we can add the quick addictions of the computer—video games, the internet, virtual this and that. The "extreme

sports" that a tiny minority of Americans engage in (and the rest watch on TV) are the antidotal flip side to the extreme slouch of the couch potato and the computer junkie, sedentary sensibilities happy to gaze (or glaze) upon a depthless screen making synthetic sounds. As my best friend with two sons says, "it's a battle to keep your kids in three dimensions." The same with ballet.

Case in point. In January, NYCB presented a new work by company corps member Melissa Barak. It was a piece called *Telemann Overture Suite in E Minor*, and Barak made it for the School of American Ballet's 2001 workshop performance. The ballet impressed NYCB director Peter Martins, and he asked Barak to set it on the company. But what was it that impressed him? Barak's work possesses a youthful bounciness that no doubt looks good on the students at SAB, and she keeps the bodies moving. But keeping the bodies moving isn't enough. It isn't even the point. What about relationships, flirtations, competitions, quests? Barak's dancers are like smiling members of a commune, so equal they flat-line in friendliness. What about Telemann? The atmosphere of the baroque, the theater of his day, the dance forms of his time? A reference to any of these might have opened out, or dramatically enlarged, the ballet. Instead, it all takes place on one level, ground level, as if the stage were an empty lot before the building goes up. For the twenty minutes of *Telemann*, amid rows of romps and kicks, nothing happens.

It was pretty hard on Barak that her ballet shared the program with two little Balanchines, *Monumentum Pro Gesualdo* (1960) and *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* (1963). They're both short and spare, so short they've been teamed up in the repertory. Even together they can seem slight, nothing really. And yet, everything. *Monumentum* is set to madrigals by Don Carlo Gesualdo, which Stravinsky recomposed for orchestra; *Movements*, also by Stravinsky, uses serial technique. So both scores are planted in a time. Balanchine uses that. His

Monumentum is grave and lyric, with a recurring pattern of narrow diagonals like long corridors. There's a cathedral feeling of vaults and stained-glass windows. And the tender pawing motion of the women's legs, well, they might be unicorns wrought, pictured, in those windows. The ballet's famous series of tosses—ballerina in arabesque, thrown high into the arms of partners—feels like white doves loosed at the altar. *Movements*, which follows after a pause, has none of the old-stone reverberation of *Monumentum*. Its silences and stillnesses are aggressive, the abyss that lives in every laboratory. Stravinsky described the women in *Movements* as "a hexachord of those bee-like little girls who seem to be bred to the eminent choreographer's specifications." They do look bred in test tubes. They could be dangerous.

These Balanchine "nothings"—so rich in natural phenomena, the imagery of the spire and the scientist, and so plainly invoking two types of faith—to see them next to the latest offerings is to be struck by how denatured most new ballets are, how empty they are of beating hearts (other than the aerobic kind) and various levels of movement. But then, there's no nature in a computer screen. No outdoors or weather, ditches and rises, the sudden flush of other life. And even if young choreographers aren't on-line, do they understand they have to let go of the barre and see the world? Even if it's only watching pigeons in Central Park?

I remember the late 1980s, when Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham were carrying the day, growing greater as they would have anyway, but in the context of Balanchine's death their power doubly profound. Look, their new work seemed to say, there is still genius here. I remember a conversation between a balletomane, another critic, and me. The 'mane referred to Merce Cunningham's dances as "ballets." The critic took issue with that. Cunningham was postmodern; his whole ethos was a reaction against the expectations of classical dance; to call his dances ballets was a contradiction

in terms, willfully naive. The conversation made an impression, because both were right. Still, I couldn't help siding with the 'mane. Cunningham may have made philosophical choices that had aesthetic ramifications, but he was born to a world saturated with classicism and came of age during "civilization as we knew it"—the old taxonomies intact.

In recent years, when Cunningham became too physically impaired to move around the studio, he began using a computer program called Lifeforms, mapping his dances with a click and slide. And yet his work never lost its creaturely feel, its prickly skin and warm-bloodedness. In a recent American Masters documentary on Cunningham, one of the surprises was his morning ritual. Cunningham sketches daily—pictures of birds, mostly shorebirds, and with an acute eye for the character of a species as revealed through posture and grouping. Again, like Balanchine, the predator's eye for life and form. From these delightful and true sketches, the camera cut to a tape of Cunningham's *Beach Birds* from 1991. We're not supposed to say that Cunningham's dances are "about" anything, but given the title, and the dancers wearing unitards halved in black and white, an evocation of laughing gulls was clearly at hand. The dance plays with the seemingly empty patience with which these birds stand on the beach, the sort of *I Ching* toss of their groupings, the random landings and liftoffs. As only the cry of a gull in the air can do, the dance questions the meaning of life, the transience, the wind. It is nothing and everything, beneath and beyond, gulls there but not there. Look at a work like *Beach Birds* and you begin to understand that the absence of dimension in our new ballets is an absence of metaphor and simile, the time-honored tools of the poet. Great choreography is poetry, and where would poetry be without its nightingales and glow-worms and long-legged flies and fleas, without the leaps and flights they bring the artist. Wallace Stevens: "I know noble accents/ And lucid, inescapable rhythms;/ But

I know, too,/ That the blackbird is involved/
In what I know."

Classical ballet of the nineteenth century is a Noah's arc of nature and a primer in the job of making metaphors and similes. One need only look to that cornerstone of dance classicism, *The Sleeping Beauty*, to see a garlanded hierarchy of court creatures: mice, rats, cats, birds, wolves, and the implied horses and hounds of the Hunt Scene. Even in the Act III wedding, when God's in his heaven and the natural and supernatural worlds are joined, creatures run true to form. In the Bluebird pas de deux, for instance, scholars have puzzled over Princess Florine's signature gesture—hand to ear, almost as if hearing a whisper. Was this movement merely coquettish or did it mean something? I've never forgotten the answer of an aging ballerina on a dance panel: Florine is a bird, the woman said, she's listening and wary because she hears Puss in Boots, *a cat*, in the wings.

Trained at Russia's Maryinsky Theatre, Balanchine learned all its lessons. The swan queens and white cats and bluebirds live on in his ballets as echoes, intonations, and sighs, leitmotifs that sing to the music, transmuting space into place (when the port de bras of Odette is worked into the ballerina role in "Diamonds," you feel the water of the lakeside has frozen into an ice-crystal palace). But Balanchine didn't limit himself to what he inherited from Petipa, Ivanov, and the rest. His ballets brim with his own observations, things animal, vegetable, and mineral, beginning with the Siren in *The Prodigal Son*: she's a black widow spider in a red hourglass chiton. Think of the chambered nautilus in *Concerto Barocco*—an inner ear hearing Bach hearing God creating life. *The Four Temperaments*, choreographed and premiered on the shallow stage of the High School of Needle Trades, is full of shape-shifting, morphing form—stinging insects and stony sphinxes and even a small cyclone. As if to show how imaginative energy can implode and open even the flattest strip of space, in *4Ts* Balanchine turns a sidewalk of stage into a Nile of the

mind (this is why Balanchine never needed elaborate sets—"place" was created in the floor pattern and the steps). And then there's the greenery winding through the entire repertoire, daisy chains and garlands and girls with weeping willow hair, all climbing and stemming from one root, the tree with the apple that opened our eyes.

The clearest, and dearest, example of what I'm talking about is in *Apollo*. Made in 1928, it is Balanchine's coming-of-age ballet, and young Apollo, learning how to use his power, is very much the young choreographer himself. Apollo has three muses whom he puts through their paces and learns from in return. The four are playmates, but the idyll cannot last. Late in the ballet, the muses seat themselves on the floor, each with a leg extended forward so their three points touch and their legs are like three rays of light, a small bonfire. As Apollo walks around them they follow him with their eyes, and when he's behind them they keep him in view by dropping their heads back, the way cats do, in a gaze that follows full circle. It's a kind of limbic attention outside human nature; anyone who has lived with cats has seen them do this, follow the same movement in unblinking synchronicity, spellbound. It is earthly too, three kittens on a hearth, and elemental, the turn of the earth around the sun. Pulling from his system what he'd seen of cats, Balanchine gives us a phenomenon, the muses' silent understanding that Apollo has changed, he's ready to be a god. When Balanchine told friends, as reported in Bernard Taper's biography, that he wanted to present Mourka in a public program titled "The Evolution of Ballet: From Petipa to Petipaw," he was, in a way, describing what he'd been doing all along.

Last year, New York City Ballet created a new position, Resident Choreographer, for Christopher Wheeldon. A City Ballet dancer, formerly of London's Royal Ballet, Wheeldon had been making ballets since his teens and he was ready to make them full time. So he stopped dancing, which was a

loss; his presence onstage was 110 percent. To see him as the happy lover in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, picking imaginary flowers oh so preciously (like an eager decorator matching swatches), was to glimpse the John Gielguds and Benny Hills in every Englishman's background. Still, Wheeldon brings his 110 percent to his own ballets. It's clear he adores the art—which is more than you can say for a lot of a classical choreographers these days.

You can see that Wheeldon wants to make ballets that are places in time and space. He wants those deep dimensions, those golden keys to other realms. He has easy musicality and a big natural gift for making lovely and unexpected enchainement (the linking of steps into a phrase). And yet in ballet after promising ballet, Wheeldon seems to hit up against his ambitions, as if the lock won't turn. In his collaborations with the set designer Ian Falconer, Wheeldon has actually imposed dimension upon the ballets through odd angles and extreme strategies of staging. Because of this—and I admire his reach—the ballets tend to begin better than they end. Wheeldon's enchainements are so immediately disarming that it takes some time to see he hasn't animated the ballet from the inside—he's not working metaphorically. *Scènes de Ballet*, a piece Wheeldon first did for SAB and later set on NYCB, opens breathtakingly, the stage split with a barre slanting down the middle. The students on one side are reality. The students on the other side are the mirror reflection—another dimension! What a wonderful point of departure. But as this classroom ballet progresses from barre to center to a pas de deux for an older boy and girl, it loses that twilight zone strangeness, that displacement unique to dancers—so much of their lives lived in a mirror. The fantasy doesn't climax or burst or dissolve interestingly. It just sort of goes away. Lord knows I can't tell Wheeldon what he should have done. Jerome Robbins saw this dancer-and-mirror duality as an atmospheric intoxication. He turned his dancers into dream creatures, the

faun and nymph of Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* set to music by Debussy. This gave him a whole other order of movement from which to pull—feral sensuality, animal languor. Other orders of movement, this is what Wheeldon must learn to use.

He comes closer in his hit from last season, *Polyphonia*. Set to ten piano pieces—oddball, exploratory, droll—by György Ligeti, the ballet is a distillation of several choreographic voices (Balanchine, Robbins, Martins). It is precise and witty, an accomplished pastiche, and it contains a tender shoot of metaphor, the second duet, which is danced by Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto. Mysterious, amphibious, she's like a deep-sea creature, opening and closing, floating up and around Soto. This duet feels like the heart of the ballet, but it comes too early to act as a culmination or as the answer to some question. Indeed, Whelan's rarely-touching-the-ground sinuousness is in whispering dialogue with Allegra Kent's floating phantom in Balanchine's *Ivesiana*, "The Unanswered Question" section. Wheeldon has created his own unanswered question: Where are we, what is she? Even though the music is Ligeti, I kept thinking of Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals*—"Aquarium." When Whelan and Soto come back in part IX, they bring their enclosed flow with them and the audience leans in. They've seen something happening. The ballet ends as it began, with the dancers' machine-age shadows cast huge upon the cyclorama. *Polyphonia* is a little too slick to be satisfying, but the little pocket of life inside stays with you.

Variations Sérieuses is both a step back, to something more concrete, and a step forward; it brims. It is a comic ballet about a ballet company, set literally onstage. Falconer's clever set puts the audience in the wings, stage left. Talk about dimension! It's a view on a ballet I've never seen before. With charm and economy, Wheeldon brings on the characters—the ballerina, the premier danseur, the young girl, the ballet master, the

corps, etc.—and tells his backstage story, which is basically *All About Eve* in toe shoes. Because Wheeldon is so focused on getting this world right and doing it in a way that gives pleasure, he reaches in all the right directions. When the diva ballerina gets angry she paws the ground like a snorting bull. Corps girls flutter and peck like hens. There's a barnyard brio to company life, and the young girl in her white leotard is like something just emerged, translucent, from the chrysalis in the eaves. She's the connection between backstage and onstage, for the ballet she understudies is about sylphs—the tutus have little wings.

The pragmatism required by such storytelling is liberating for Wheeldon. (I have long felt that Martins could help out his young choreographers if he gave them stiffer assignments, or pointed exercises, like the kinds one used to get in acting classes—pretend you're a lettuce in love; make a pas de deux for porcupines.) Wheeldon lays in all kinds of details and observations, making references (there's an Astaire-inspired dance for four stagehands with brooms) and allusions: the young girl's opening solo is full of turns in attitude, the pose of Mercury and a forecast of her mercurial rise. The ballet is booming with life.

When *Variations Sérieuses* was premiered last spring, the ending was weak (to be honest, I can't remember how it ended). But Wheeldon has fixed the ending. Now, as in *Polyphonia*, he brings the ballet round full circle. His next choreographic challenge is to make an ending that doesn't circle back, that is instead a surprise even to himself. Here, however, the ending works. The young girl—a diva now, flouncing and pouting like the first one did—watches another spidery corps girl tiptoe onto the empty stage, just as she once had, hungry for stardom. It's the eternal Eve Harrington—there's always one in the wings—and a nice nip of an ending, a sting of recognition. Paradise and predators, feathers and claws. What is ballet but two genres in one body? Metaphysical poetry and melodrama.

Compressed narratives, minute actions

by Daniel Kunitz

In the hands of Picasso and Braque—the first to employ it as artistic technique—collage was a formal means of exploring and testing the limits of two-dimensionality in painting. For the Surrealists, it was, in the words of T. G. Nguyen, “a creative strategy” like the *cadavre exquis*, a key to unlocking the subconscious and a method of frustrating rational meaning. Because their interests were primarily epistemological—what the clash of disparate elements might mean—the Surrealists’ use of collage tended to result in jangling narrative pictures enlivened by visual puns and jokes. They came to collage by way of Dada rather than Cubism. To formalist Moderns of the Greenbergian stripe, this emphasis on narrative was a heresy, a retrograde revival of academic illusionism. Of course, we now know that, with notable exceptions, the artistic mindset of the latter half of the twentieth century was dominated not by Greenberg but by Duchamp, and, it must be admitted, Surrealist collage had, and continues to have, an enormous impact on the practice of artists.

What surprises in the Zabriskie Gallery’s delightful exhibition of almost forty collages by sixteen different artists is the presence of both a number of poets—Jacques Prévert, Georges Hugnet, and Valentine Penrose among them—and quite a few artists of whom gallery-goers might not have heard.¹ Virginia Zabriskie suggests that poets might be attracted to collage by its compressed,

narrative aspect, which is in some sense analogous to poetry, and by the fact that one need not have any facility with drawing or painting to construct them.

At base, there seem to be two modes of making collage. One can introduce cut-out elements to an extant picture, and thereby change its meaning, make a joke of it, or, in the case of well-known images, confound our expectations of them. So, starting with a postcard, Claude Cahun pastes the image of a large man sitting over the eternal flame on the tomb of an unknown soldier in *Le jolis coins de Paris* (1935). Or one can begin with a blank ground and build up a picture by gathering and affixing any number of cut-out elements and juxtaposing them. In an uncluttered example, *Untitled* (c. 1930s), Joseph Cornell pastes four images on a white ground: a mustachioed man holding up a small chair below another chair that has a squirrel wrapping its tail around one leg. Marcel Marien’s *Partouse artistique* (1945), meanwhile, jumbles together a host of images from well-known works of art: two cut-outs of Manet’s *Olympia*, a female head by Picasso, a man with a large phallus constructed out of the *Mona Lisa*, etc.

Odd as it might sound, I also found it worthwhile to pay attention to the quality of the artists’ cuts. Hugnet, for instance,

¹ “Surrealist Collage” was on view at Zabriskie Gallery, New York, from January 8 to February 23, 2002.

snips his images with great precision. In *Untitled* (c. 1947), the doubled image of one woman whipping another, as well as the doubled image of a nude on a couch, are, because of the care Hugent took with his scissors, integrated seamlessly into a French roofscape, while another finely cut image of a hand dealing out tarot cards intrudes from above. Yet the quality of seamlessness is not always desired. At times, an artist will highlight the torn edges of a given element, and, at times, as is the case with Penrose, the artist will leave a tiny border around particular elements to give them an unreal or heightened fictional character.

In contrast to later examples of the form, most of the collages on view were flat, two-dimensional works, the exception being Eileen Agar's *Ma muse* (1936), which contains some three-dimensional affixed elements, such as string. Of the numerous morsels being offered, I preferred the clean-edged, less cluttered, and less sophomorically scandalizing works of Nicolás de Lekuona, Cornell, Prévert, Max Ernst, as well as the eyebrow-raising inclusion of Victor Vasarely's *Contes* (1931–32), an appropriately funny though frightening image of a child's head, the eyes blanked out with blue ink (oh, those baby blues . . .), pasted into a pink bubble with a tiny star, crown, insect, and flower floating beside it.

Recently, The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired its first video artwork, *The Quintet of Remembrance* (2000) by Bill Viola—raising the question of whether or not the Met ought to own or exhibit video art at all.² I, for one, think video has a place at the museum, albeit a limited one, reflecting the extremely limited successes of artists who have attempted to utilize the medium. An encyclopedic institution collecting the finest aesthetic objects from all periods and a variety of cultures, the Met has a duty, so I would argue, to cull the finest pieces from

even the suspect, recent past. That the Met waited until now—some thirty-five years after Nam June Paik first began experimenting with television and video art, and a full twenty-five years after Viola, the closest thing video has to a master, began his career—shows laudatory restraint. That the curators chose a piece by Viola is a credit to their generally high standards of taste. Among the legions of artists and pretenders churning out what are often excruciatingly boring, banal works in video, Viola stands as virtually the sole practitioner who consistently produces intriguing and visually satisfying efforts.

My quarrel with the museum is this: they chose the wrong piece. Shot on thirty-five millimeter film, *The Quintet of Remembrance* extends a sixty-second real-time performance to sixteen minutes and ninety seconds. In it a tableau of three women and two men express an array of emotions, which, we are told, encompass joy, sorrow, rapture, anger, and fear. However, the actors do not represent static allegorical temperaments; each of them cycles through a variety of emotional states.

After sitting for a moment in the small, darkened, theater-like room watching the seemingly rigid image on screen, one notices, with a frisson of buoyant surprise, that the actors are moving in glacial slow-motion. On the left, a graying, blond-haired woman in red-knit clothing, who, because of her initial expression, I'll call Rapture, clasps her hands to her chest. Standing slightly behind and to the right of her, a man with graying, spiky hair—Joy—has one hand on Rapture's shoulder, slowly raising his other hand to the shoulder of a squat, older woman—Sorrow—who also holds one hand to her chest. Behind Sorrow and to the right, the face of Anger, a woman, perhaps in her forties, with pulled-back dark hair, peeks out between Sorrow and Fear, a bald man with a ruddy complexion wearing a dark purple shirt.

Minute actions occur: hands move, shoulders rise and fall as the actors breathe, subtly altering the composition. And, as I

² *The Quintet of Remembrance*, by Bill Viola, remains on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

mentioned, the actors assume a number of emotions. Rapture and Sorrow switch expressions; at one point, all five seem to portray sorrow. Still, having watched the film three times (twice at the Met and once when it was first shown at the James Cohan Gallery), I found the emotions difficult to discern, and I'm certain that without the wall text one would fail to name accurately all five emotions represented.

Very rarely can I sit through an entire video performance, yet I found the *The Quintet* strangely engaging and Viola's conceit, of introducing the element of time into the picture frame, worthy of the experiment. Unlike most so-called video artists, Viola is a serious investigator of the medium's possibilities, one who is attentive to art history and concerned primarily with eliciting an honest aesthetic response.

But it's the art history that, in my mind, gets the Met into trouble. As the wall text explains, *The Quintet* was inspired by Viola's study of late medieval and early Renaissance painting, specifically Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)*, Andrea Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi*, and Dieric Bouts's *Mater Dolorosa (Sorrowing Madonna)*, and one suspects that it was this explicit reference to old masters that mollified the curators' anxieties as they went about selecting their first work of video art.

The thing is Viola has always used painting as his model and inspiration, and *The Quintet* seems neither the finest example of that inspiration nor the strongest or the most typical example of the artist's oeuvre.

It functions more like a film than as an installed object incorporating film or video, and thereby it suffers in comparison with the many greater films made in the last century while misrepresenting Viola as a film artist—he's not; he's essentially a "painterly" and sculptural artist.

Paradoxically, having chosen *The Quintet* for its relationship to the Met's collection of paintings, the curators acquired a work that must be seen in a darkened room, cut-off from the rest of the collection. It seems to me that an installation such as *The Crossing*, or such a work as *Mater*, a diptych of two flat screens propped on a box from the same series as *The Quintet*, both of which could be more fully integrated into the Modern and contemporary galleries, would have been more astute choices.

Video has far from proven itself the equal of older, more traditional media, and, indeed, the inherently distancing properties of the technology—the lack of tactile qualities, in most instances, and the removal of human touch from the artistic process come to mind—might very well prevent it from ever producing an artist of the highest stature. This does not mean, however, that the Met should ignore it any more than they should ignore recent developments in painting. In Viola they have settled on an artist who, at the least, shares the aspirations and values we ascribe to the acknowledged masters in the Met's collections. It will likely take another quarter century to see how well he has settled among them.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Ladies and gentlemen, Yefim Bronfman is quite simply one of the best pianists in the world. And if that's not saying enough for you—and it may not be—he is a very fine pianist for any age.

He confirmed the point in an outing with the New York Philharmonic, under the baton of guest conductor Christian Thielemann. The concerto was the Mozart in C minor, K. 491. This is an excellent test of any pianist's worth, requiring head, heart, and depth. Everything about Bronfman's performance was tasteful and beautiful. He was pristine, yet not prissy. He adhered to the letter of the score, while reflecting its spirit. There wasn't a hint of a wrong accent, and the breathing was right. Bronfman offered bravura when called for, but indulged in no flash. Matching between left hand and right was exceptionally good.

Bronfman played his own cadenzas—which is somewhat unusual in these times—and they were interesting and appropriate, complementing the piece, not distracting from it. The “song” he “sang” in the middle movement managed to be both sprightly and serious. It was somewhat nostalgic, and extremely Mozartean. Bronfman has some of the qualities of Clara Haskil, or of the early Murray Perahia—yet he can hurl thunderbolts, too, capable in any repertory. In the Mozart, he deployed just a bit of rubato, always knowing how far to go, never straying beyond. He was super-crisp where he should have been, elegant and limpid when that was

desirable. His playing was aristocratic yet not distant, correct—“impersonal”—but not merely dutiful or mechanical.

Covering the entire performance was high musicianship, and a high pianism. This was nearly ideal Mozart. Every member of the orchestra applauded Bronfman vigorously—a relatively rare thing. As I have complained before about the paucity of worthwhile, to say nothing of great, pianists on the scene today, I especially owe it to point out these truths—these gratifying truths—about the Russian-Israeli-American wonder Bronfman.

Michelle DeYoung is a youngish American mezzo-soprano with a big and burgeoning career: concert dates, operatic roles, recordings, the works. So it was with some anticipation that I attended her recital in Weill Recital Hall (part of the larger Carnegie complex). It could be that DeYoung did not put her best foot forward that evening.

She began her varied and well-chosen program with some lieder from Robert Schumann. DeYoung does not feature a beautiful sound, or at least she did not on this occasion. It was an unclear sound, having some fuzz around it. Nor was her technique steady: intonation was faulty, phrasing was awkward. Also, she must work to take some of her breathiness away. Musically speaking, she presented the Schumann songs in a rather bland, unprobing way. She took a biggish, quasi-operatic approach: but this

did not mean added excitement or drama. In songs of Henri Duparc, DeYoung did not fare much better. Again, she took too big an approach, with no payoff. These lovely little pieces were not spun out, finely; they were sung almost as though by a belter. The singer displayed little control, contributed little nuance. This is not a matter of inability; DeYoung is obviously able. Perhaps it is a question of focus and dedication. So too, many of her syllables and words were unclear, and some of them were just plain mispronounced.

Beginning the second half of the program were *Six Songs on Poems by D. H. Lawrence*, composed for this singer by the young Daniel Sutton. These items are rather pleasant if not memorable. A couple of them are a bit more than pleasant, having some communicative power. Given that the songs were written for her, it's curious that DeYoung had not memorized them. (Maybe they're unmemorable to her, too.) Yet she sang them with competence and appreciation.

And it was good to take in some of Lawrence's poetry, including the beguiling "Night": "Now that the night is here/ A new thing comes to pass, eyes close/ And the animals curl down on the dear earth, to sleep./ But the limbs of man long to fold and close upon the living body of another human being/ In shut-eyed touch." Words a treat to compose to, to be sure.

Speaking of the night, Samuel Barber's "Nocturne" is one of the most beautiful and most sensual songs in the entire American repertory, and beyond: yet DeYoung barely laid a glove on it. Then it was Charles Ives's "Charlie Rutlage," one of that composer's nutty scenes, followed by his "Berceuse." Unfortunately, DeYoung simply lacked the support—the technical wherewithal—to give this gentle second piece the quietude and smoothness it requires. To close was Barber's "I Hear an Army," which had a decent rigor, but was made into an opera aria, and not a very good one.

Michelle DeYoung must have something on the ball for the vocal world to have responded as positively to her as it has. But

these winning qualities were not to the fore in her recent recital.

Artur Schnabel is said to have quipped, "My concerts are boring both before and *after* intermission." By that he meant that he liked to program serious, weighty music from beginning to end. Other great pianists have taken different approaches. Arthur Rubinstein—who loved to dine—likened his programs to a menu: first you have an appetizer, then a main course, then dessert (with various other courses sprinkled in between). Rubinstein would even offer something like an after-dinner mint: perhaps Villa-Lobos's "Prole do bebê" as a final encore.

The Romanian pianist Radu Lupu comes from the Schnabel school. He is a worthy—if sometimes eccentric and willful—player of Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms. In Carnegie Hall he presented a recital of Schubert, Beethoven, and his countryman George Enescu. To begin was Schubert's Impromptu in C minor, Op. 90, No. 1, with its bold, sustained introductory note. Lupu perfectly proclaimed that note, setting the tone—almost literally—for the entire evening. The Impromptu was beautifully weighted, with Lupu having a keen awareness of how sound carries (which is related to weightedness in piano playing). Lupu is especially good in severe or dark music; he can be less good in music requiring a smile, some warmth—but he is always interesting.

After the Impromptu came Beethoven's Sonata in E minor, Op. 90, a seldom played work. (Every piece on the program, incidentally, was in a minor key—a typical Lupu touch, even if unconscious.) Lupu was not especially lyrical in the melodic line, and he has the problem of failing to sound some of the notes he depresses. But he showed a firm sense of the arc of the sonata, according it a tension. No matter what he plays, Lupu is a solid pianist, imparting a feeling of sturdiness, of having a firm foundation, of being a purposeful builder. I might note here that the Beethoven E minor happens to be a most Schubertian sonata—or is it Schubert who's Beethovenian?

The Enescu on the program was the Sonata No. 1 in F-sharp minor, not the Sonata No. 3 in D major, of which another Romanian pianist, Dinu Lipatti, made a famous and much-cherished recording. Here Lupu proved to be the possessor of many colors. He is also an adept pedaler, often seeming on the verge of overpedaling without actually doing so. He gave a performance of acute sensitivity, practically Debussyan. I, for one, have had my doubts about Lupu from time to time, but this was inarguably first-rate playing. And so it was with Schubert's Sonata in C minor, D. 958, which composed the second half of the recital. Lupu is a probing and committed musician, demanding the listener's attention and respect, no matter what our conclusions may be.

At the end of January, the Orchestre de Paris visited Carnegie Hall, with its music director, Christoph Eschenbach, the German who is set to assume the leadership of the Philadelphia Orchestra. They brought with them the French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard, who has received some of the most rapturous reviews of the recent period. What was all the fuss about? Was it truly for his pianism, or did it have to do with his steadfast devotion to new music (Aimard has long been a soldier in the army of Pierre Boulez)?

On the basis of his performance of Ravel's G-major concerto, enthusiasm about Aimard—as pianist—is misplaced. This performance contained many strange and frustrating things, including the fact that Aimard was sometimes inaudible. His opening, for example, was extremely hard to hear; his glissandos—which cap this opening—were negligible. Throughout the first movement, his playing was muddy—not coloristic, but simply muddy, poor. Inner voices were muted, if not, again, inaudible. Ravel's wonderful, jagged rhythms were obscured, and if you don't get the rhythms (or the colors) right, you might as well lay off this piece. The cadenza had some charm, but Aimard hardly touched the delights of this movement.

The Adagio was worse. Aimard failed to sing out, and, more damaging, he failed to sustain the song. His line was uneven, without legato—thumping. His playing was grossly mannered, as if to ask, "Isn't this movement adorable?" And the answer is, "No, not played like that." The music had no flow, breaking down at several points (and in this respect Eschenbach was no help). The closing Presto—toccata-like—was limp, characterless, without snap or dash. Aimard would merely pick at the keyboard, with little sound—little of the concerto—coming out. It is not too much to say that the playing was amateurish—this, from a toast of Carnegie Hall.

Just possibly, Pierre-Laurent Aimard's duties to contemporary music have earned him, in certain quarters, a pass.

But now for something truly special: Hilary Hahn's traversal of the Shostakovich Violin Concerto No. 1, with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Riccardo Chailly conducting. I have spoken before about the profusion of terrific young violinists. Hahn, a twenty-two-year-old Baltimorean, is one of them, and near the head of the pack.

The Shostakovich concerto is a cerebral, technical, and musical challenge, and Hahn was up to it in totality. She has always exhibited confidence in her playing, and that confidence is well justified. She carries herself as she plays: with extreme poise and self-assurance. She knows what she is doing, and she knows—if I may—that she knows what she's doing.

From the first notes, she was arresting. Her sound was elegant, aristocratic, and remarkably smooth. Her playing was clean and clear, but also substantial, rich. She played with beauty, but without giving the music a plushness that wouldn't suit it. She conveyed the strangeness and sadness of the first movement—Nocturne—with zero emoting, instead using self-restraint. Her reserve made the music all the more affecting. There was an almost impossible purity in her playing, allowing for a transport, a ghostliness. Her control of dynamics—an

important aspect of doing justice to this concerto—was extraordinary. Here is a woman who can do quite simply whatever she likes with her instrument.

She knew to accord the Scherzo a Russian roughness, fiddling a merry, biting, Shostakovichian dance. She rode the rest of the concerto home with her customary rhythmic sureness, tonal judgment, and musical engagement. One sat amazed. The entire performance—while having that wise restraint—had huge vitality and quivering, obvious intelligence.

Do you remember the headline, “Menuhin Fiddles While Orchestra Burns”? This appeared after the young Yehudi played an encore following a concerto. In Carnegie Hall, Hahn did the same, with no (apparent) burning from the orchestra. What she offered was the Siciliana from the Bach Sonata in G minor—and it was marked by the poise, correctness, and musicality that are by now expected from Hahn. She is only twenty-two (which, speaking of Menuhin, is not terribly young in violinistic terms), but there’s no waiting around: she is the genuine article.

The next night, the Concertgebouw and its longtime leader, the Italian Chailly, had the stage all to themselves, for Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 (the “Resurrection”). The Concertgebouw is a formidable orchestra, and Chailly is plainly gifted: but he is one of those conductors who manage everything—every bar, every phrase—from the podium. “What’s wrong with that?” you may ask. “It’s the conductor’s job to manage.” Well, yes: but there’s the kind of managing that directs the players to perform something naturally and faithfully, and there’s the kind of managing that draws continual attention to the conductor and smothers or distorts the music. Chailly falls prey to the erroneous kind.

The opening Allegro was adequately done, as Chailly kept the Mahlerian fist shaking. Technical precision was not exactly the name of the game here: there was some clumsy playing, some clumsy entrances. But

the Concertgebouw forces were impassioned, and they are obviously skilled. Chailly took some odd liberties with tempo, and a few of them were not unsuccessful. But the movement’s great chromatic ending—a downward scale—was unnatural, stilted, almost experimental-seeming: as though a talented but wayward student were trying out a new idea, to be corrected by a patient, appreciative, but conscientious teacher. Alas, there was no teacher.

The second movement felt a bit heavy, not sufficiently *grazioso*. And it was cluttered and unclear. It was also slow and labored, as Chailly continued to indulge himself. There was about an hour and a half between the final two notes of the movement, pretty much wiping out Mahler’s own idea. The third movement was deprived of its insinuating quality, and it was warped by further rhythmic experimentalism. The two singers for the evening—the mezzo-soprano Petra Lang and the soprano Janice Watson—were placed on a riser to the extreme left of the stage, an unusual move. In the “Urlicht,” Watson delivered some good, controlled singing, but it lacked emotional power. She was unfortunately hostage to Chailly’s slow tempo and ponderousness.

In the last movement, Chailly personalized and stretched everything to unacceptable extremes. When he actually allowed the orchestra to play a phrase—sometimes two or three in a row—naturally and unidiosyncratically, it came as a great relief. The Westminster Symphonic Choir (of which the local New York Philharmonic makes frequent use), however, was superb. Their opening notes were hair-raising. Chailly, oddly enough, had them seated: but we eventually found out why. He had them stand suddenly on their final “aufersteh’n” (rise again)—one last gimmick in a gimmicky, exasperating performance. In fact, this stunt—with the choir—was one of the most vulgar things I have ever witnessed in a concert hall. If there is any piece that can do without such tactics, it is the thoroughly honest Symphony No. 2 of Mahler.

Whither the “Philadelphia Sound”?

by *Patrick J. Smith*

It is hardly surprising news that, in today's fragmented performing arts environment, the centrality of the symphony orchestra in the civic world is in severe jeopardy. Certain cities, with a history of important symphony orchestras, have managed to hold onto a share of the cultural limelight—and a share of the monies available to nonprofit arts organizations. But, in all too many cities, the symphony orchestra is the victim of declining ticket sales, declining contributions, and, not at all insignificantly, declining interest from the movers and shakers. It finds itself fighting for its existence and, not infrequently, going quietly out of business.

Some cities still pride themselves on their orchestras, notably those with a strong Germanic tradition in the Midwest, like Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Chicago, but also such cities as Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Philadelphia, where the musical culture was founded on the performances of the local orchestra. The history of these orchestras is long, and they have built up not only a rapport with the city and its surrounding suburbs, but also an endowment that should ensure a continuity of existence. In recent years, however, endowment monies have come under increasing pressure, as costs have increased and orchestras have run large deficits; and it must be said that the managements, not infrequently, have handled their monies badly. American symphony orchestras continue to struggle with these problems, which are

only increased by the inexorable movement away from a perceived importance of serious art.

It is therefore refreshing to see a community that is willing to champion its arts through building a complex that will house a symphony orchestra of major importance. The Philadelphia Orchestra has long wanted a hall more suited to its talents than the ancient Academy of Music (founded in 1900, the orchestra has never had another home). Finally, and at last, they have the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, built at a cost of \$265 million.

The Kimmel Center takes the idea of clustering performance spaces from Lincoln Center, but goes beyond it by enclosing the whole in a barrel-vaulted glass roof, reminiscent of European train stations. This enclosure is a public space, to be utilized by all, and includes restaurants, walkways, and snack shops—to what effect (Milan's Galleria or a grungy mall) is to be seen. Within the enclosed space are two buildings: one, Verizon Hall, a 2500-seat concert hall for the orchestra, and the other, Perelman Theater, a 650-seat theater for chamber orchestras, recitals, and cabaret performances. (A black box theater in Verizon Hall is as yet unfinished.) The old Academy of Music is being renovated to house the opera and ballet companies, and the entire complex will be under the auspices of an umbrella organization, the Regional Performing Arts Center.

The architect chosen for the concert hall was Rafael Viñoly, the acoustician Russell Johnson (of Artec Associates). Today, there is an inordinate amount of ink spilled over the question of hall acoustics—much of it hot air. Acoustics, though it can be grounded in acres of measurements and tomes of statistics, remains largely an occult science, one gleefully dissected by critics, performers, and audiences. A certain amount of this discussion, it must be said, is chimeric: one's ears are told something, and one hears what they are told. A general agreement accrues to a space over a period of years (e.g., the deficiencies of Avery Fisher Hall or the magnificence of Boston's Symphony Hall), but in truth orchestras learn to cope with the acoustic space and therefore ameliorate and adjust to its qualities. The most important acoustic quality is that the orchestra members should hear each other, and, whatever the acoustic problems of the old Academy of Music, there was agreement that this was one of its strengths.

Then there is the question of the Academy of Music and the Philadelphia Orchestra's famed sound. Granted that there were acoustic problems (one of the speakers at the inauguration of Verizon Hall said, "At last we Philadelphians can hear the orchestra as everyone on its tours has heard it"), the orchestra still made its reputation for decades with two conductors who were noted for burnishing the orchestra's sound—Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy—to a fare-thee-well. The general wisdom was that the orchestra had to work overtime on its sound to make up for the hall's deficiencies, an explanation that sounds wrong to me. The fact is that generations of Philadelphians were enamored with the sound of their orchestra, and I never felt, when I heard them year after year in Carnegie Hall, that they sounded over-brilliant in New York because of their conditioning in Philadelphia.

At all events, the opening of a new concert hall today brings out the acoustic mavens, and Russell Johnson was put to answering any number of questions that

could only be answered by performances of the orchestra itself. One of the constant reiterations made by both Viñoly and Johnson was that they were avoiding the "shoebox" design. A shoebox (viz, Boston's Symphony Hall) has long been thought to provide the best acoustics, but it seems unnecessarily defensive to insist that it is the model to be rejected: halls like the Philharmonie in Berlin have nothing to do with shoeboxes but are acclaimed. In fact, however, Viñoly in designing his hall has opted for a configuration which I believe is nothing less than a combination of shoebox and "surround" on the Philharmonie model. It is a gorgeous space, entirely lined in dark mahogany, in the shape (roughly) of a cello—that is, two ovals, the smaller one encompassing the stage area and the chorus area and seats behind the stage, and the larger one encompassing the main seating area itself. The orchestra section (that is, the seating area) and the orchestra tier section behind it have been designed to suggest the configuration of the Academy of Music.

The differences from the Academy are much more evident. Since Johnson has designed a variable acoustic environment, he has had the architect incorporate certain features that can be manipulated. Along the side walls of the concert halls are wooden panels that can be opened or closed, and behind these is what is called a "reverb chamber"—an area of curtains and free space that allows for reverberation. Over the stage is a three-part acoustic baffle, which can be moved up or down.

It was determined, after consultation with the orchestra and with its maestro Wolfgang Sawallisch, to leave the side doors closed and the baffle unmoved for a period of time before making any changes. (Other orchestras visiting the hall, of course, can adjust them as they see fit).

The opening night concert (December 15) followed a potpourri the night before (I did not attend), which included Sir Elton John moaning for an hour into a microphone. He received \$2 million, and this may tell us

more about the state of the performing arts in today's society than we wish to know. The December 15 concert included the (obligatory?) commissioned piece, the (obligatory?) appearance by popular American soloists (three here), and an orchestral dazzler programmed to show off the acoustics. It was followed by a lavish dinner throughout the space.

The commissioned piece, *Color Wheel*, was by Aaron Jay Kernis, an American currently in strong favor and the recent winner of various awards, not least the prestigious (and lucrative) Grawemeyer. The use of the word "color" in the title is indicative of its aim, and also of the composer's predilection: an earlier work (the one that won the award) was *Colored Field* (available on Virgin Classics 45464). Kernis is expert at orchestral color, and *Color Wheel* is in fact a concerto for orchestra, showing off the sections of the band and highlighting each in a twenty-minute orchestral tour. What sets Kernis apart from other deft orchestrators are real musical ideas to go along with the dazzle and a sense of overall structure that leaves one satisfied rather than titillated. Here the orchestral journey climaxed in a nicely judged coda with a Sibelius-like peroration, all calculated to generate applause. Just the kind of piece to open a new hall.

This was followed by the redoubtable team of Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, and Emanuel Ax romping through the Beethoven Triple Concerto. The three, in a post-rehearsal press conference, may have pretended that this is great Beethoven, but

it's not. The pleasure came more from the presence onstage of the three than from any innate quality of the music. Finally, we had one of the ultimate orchestral dazzlers, the Second Suite from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*. Sawallisch let out all the orchestral stops, to the delight of the audience.

And what of the acoustics? With the caveat that one concert, and a "gala" at that, does not allow for a reasoned judgment, I can venture the following: it is very bright and quite "dry" in the accepted preference for today's halls. Each section of the orchestra is clear, particularly the woodwinds and, of course, the brass and "kitchen" (all the percussive instruments). That is, each section but the lower ones. I felt no presence in the lower strings (cellos and double basses), which again is typical of modern concert halls, and for optimal performance of the nineteenth-century romantic composers—not to mention the famous "Philadelphia sound"—this will have to be addressed. One must feel the weight of the low strings as viscerally as possible. Orchestra members say they can hear each other onstage, and, from the viewpoint of only a few times onstage, they like the hall.

It will be interesting to revisit Verizon Hall next season, after the orchestra has played there for a year and after other orchestras have tested its strengths and weaknesses. At that time a better judgment on the acoustics may be made—with the reservation that some of that supposedly objective judgment will be personal.

The media

Reporting innuendo

by James Bowman

What do you think? Is the Bush administration “hiding something or lying” about what it knows about the bankruptcy of the Enron Corporation? Or are you, perhaps, the sort of sucker who just accepts things on trust and believes everything that government officials tell you? Maybe, like Roy Marshall, a fifty-eight-year-old air-conditioning salesman from Albany, you think that “the Bush administration knows more than they’re telling.” But then, also like Roy, you are smart enough to realize that “all politicians do that.” Tell me about it! So then, what does Roy say to the big question? “Are they lying flat out? I don’t think so.” But, clearly, he’s got his eye on them. Roy’s no fool. He’s the sort of guy who, if you ask him whether Enron’s crooked accounting practices are “widespread in other large corporations” or “an isolated case,” will be with the sophisticated 70 percent who say “widespread” and not the 10 percent of naïfs who picked “isolated case.” Where have those guys been?

In the same way, he’ll be with the 50 percent who said that the Republicans’ policies favored the rich and not the 14 percent who said that they favored the middle class. And is Roy the kind of guy who would doubt for a single minute “that big business wielded too much influence, not just with the Bush White House but also with members of Congress of both parties”? Don’t make me laugh. Yet I’ll bet that Roy also knew which party was “closer” to those

Texan fat cats who enriched themselves while, effectively, plundering their employees’ retirement funds. Describing himself as an independent voter, he might well have agreed with another independent, David Olson, a thirty-four-year-old security consultant from Portland, Oregon, who told Richard Berke and Janet Elder of *The New York Times*: “Certainly our battle with terrorism continues to be significant. And I support Bush in the way he is handling that. I’m not in full agreement with his tax plans and his handling of the economy. The budget deficit needs to be dealt with as one of the top priorities for the government.”

Mr. Olson, say Mr. Berke and Miss Elder, was “reflecting . . . steadfast support for Mr. Bush on the war but holding reservations about him on other issues.” Oddly enough, this was exactly the sort of voter for whom the electoral strategy, recommended to their fellow Democrats by Stan Greenberg, James Carville, and Robert Shrum, was designed. “Enron,” they concluded, “has the potential to shape the entire political environment for 2002, impact other issues and reduce confidence in the Bush administration and Republicans.” It was hardly surprising, then, that on the same day *The New York Times* and CBS rounded up Roy and David and 1,032 other people by telephone, put such pre-answered questions to them, and splashed the results on the *Times*’s front page (“Poll Finds Enron’s Taint Clings More to G.O.P. Than Democrats”), Mr.

Berke also reported that “many Democrats are downright giddy over the company’s implosion. Not since Watergate and Richard M. Nixon’s cozying up to corporate bigwigs wielding bags of money, they say, has their party had such an ideal vehicle to arouse the citizenry and skewer a Republican president as favoring monied interests.”

Mr. Berke’s giddiness could hardly have been less vertiginous than that of the Democrats in writing that his poll “underscores the image of a White House run by the upper crust.” Such underscoring of popular prejudices and received wisdom is to a large extent what polling is *for*, though pollsters can rarely be got to admit it. For further examples of the politically tendentious use of polling by the media, see Matthew Robinson’s useful new book called *Mobocracy: How the Media’s Obsession With Polling Twists the News, Alters Elections, and Undermines Democracy* (Prima Publishing). I don’t know about the undermining democracy part. It could be argued that this kind of manipulation is the essence of democracy, which is why philosophers at least as far back as Plato have warned against it.

Now that history has ended, however, the job of the philosopher can only be to watch the workings of democracy and to laugh. And for laughter, the implementation of the Democratic “strategy” mentioned above, to pin the Enron scandal on Bush and the Republicans, provided ample occasion, especially when it set off an inter-party competition to be the first to point the finger of accusation. As Congress geared up for a full-scale scandal investigation, *The New York Times* reported that, “of the 248 senators and House members serving on the 11 Congressional committees that are investigating the Enron collapse, 212 have received campaign contributions from Enron or its accounting firm, Arthur Andersen.” Among the recipients was Ernest “Fritz” Hollings of South Carolina, Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, who led the Democratic charge against Republicans who had taken Enron’s gold, even

though he had done so himself. When the fact was pointed out to him, he replied that others on his committee had got much more and that, as chairman, he considered the paltry \$3,500 he had received to be “not a contribution but an insult.”

Let that be a lesson to future Enrons: if you’re going to buy a US Senator, make sure you pay in proportion to his own idea of his importance. To some Democrats, Hollings perhaps among them, Enron may have represented an opportunity for payback for the years of the Clintons’ troubles with the Whitewater investigations, even though no illegal or unethical behavior was even being alleged against any members of the Bush administration. But I think that, for the most part, they behaved as they did because that is how the game of politics is played these days. This is also why the media plunged into the Enron story with such alacrity: not only because their sympathies are naturally with the Democrats anyway—at times, after all, they were equally enthusiastic about Whitewater stories—but also because their own idea of their *raison d’être* increasingly depends on investigating scandal, or anything that can be made to look like scandal. Like Senator Hollings, they expect to be paid on the basis of what they believe about themselves.

Moreover, post-Watergate, all Washington scandal has increasingly taken place in a nightmarish, Catch-22 world, where the victim’s protestation of innocence is instantly taken as evidence of his guilt. It is a form of mass paranoia that makes scandal to a large extent self-generating. Thus *USA Today*:

Even some Bush allies say the White House hasn’t been forthcoming enough and worry that the controversy will continue. Scandal veterans from President Clinton’s administration say their successors don’t seem to have learned much from the mistakes they made. “What hurt the Clintons was the perception that they were not as forthcoming as they might have been,” says Mark Fabiani, who was Clinton’s spokesman on scandals for two years. “The first lesson is, if you’ve got material, turn it over right away. Don’t fight it.”

Mr. Fabiani no doubt hung up the phone chuckling. How nice that the reporter implied that he, Mark Fabiani, was a “Bush ally.” An added bonus was the unquestioned assumption that this administration, like the Clintons, had potentially embarrassing or incriminating “material.” Likewise, Don Van Natta in *The New York Times*: “The rules in the damage-control playbook are deceptively simple: be the first to release the bad news (all at once, if possible). Do not misrepresent information. And the cover-up is always worse than the crime. Yet, last week, Washington once again watched as a new administration seemed to ignore the old rules when it scrambled to deal with what may be its first full-blown political scandal.”

Even pointing out that scandal is self-generating can become an example of its powers of self-generation, as when the former Clinton press secretary, Joe Lockhart, told Mike Allen of *The Washington Post* that “the facts can almost take on a secondary role in these things. . . . For better or worse, this will not ultimately rest on whether someone can prove that someone did something wrong.” And so, shaking their heads, the media continue to report on the alleged scandal not on the basis of substantive evidence of wrongdoing but on that of public perception and poll numbers that suggest (or can be made to suggest) that public confidence in the administration is slipping. “Today,” wrote Ellen Goodman portentously, “the eighth-largest corporation in America is buried under the rubble of a scandal that *may* [emphasis added] reach the White House”—and she added a gratuitous play on the words “Teapot Dome” to suggest a scandalous association for which there was no other evidence.

In an equally sly way, an editorial in *The New York Times* called the collapse of a corporation’s stock price on account of shady dealings “the business world’s equivalent of Watergate.” There may have been no break-in and even, so far as even the administration’s worst enemies knew, no illegal be-

havior at all, but the very word “Watergate” could not only effect a journalistic arousal but also stand for a hopeful political dimension as yet unmanifest. After all, hadn’t the administration, for all the Enron bucks in its campaign coffers, turned a deaf ear to the company’s cries for help as it was going down for the third time? What was the problem? Richard Berke’s article in the *Times* gave the connection all he could find and came up with this: “Republicans are especially vulnerable because Enron reinforces the long-held perception that theirs is the party of big business and the rich. The White House is already a target because the administration is stocked with officials formerly involved with the oil industry in Texas.”

It was an acknowledgment that the press, like the politicians, were now simply playing the scandal game. Truth to both was an irrelevancy. All that counted was the perceptions of the Roys and the Davids whom they honored by quoting in their telephone poll, and the electoral power that their ill-informed and malleable opinions might translate into. Here’s how Juliet Eilperin in *The Washington Post* explained it: “Enron’s saga could prove politically troublesome for Bush, even if the scandal is never linked directly to the White House. Voters tell pollsters they associate Bush more closely with corporate influence than they do many other political figures.” Don Van Natta and Richard A. Oppel in *The New York Times* helpfully inform us that “Democrats are seeking to make Mr. Bush’s friendship with Mr. Lay into a political liability. The White House, in turn, in seeking to distance the administration from both Mr. Lay and Enron.” Do tell! There’s behind-the-scenes reporting for you!

Meanwhile, on the op-ed pages, the likes of Frank Rich were rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of two, three, many Enrons. By another crafty use of the conditional, Mr. Rich aligned himself with the sagacious Roy Marshalls and David Olsons who always knew that big business and big government were crooked, noting that “En-

ron may be as much a cultural scandal as it is a business and political scandal. It is, as one friend puts it, as if a window had opened and revealed the way it all really works.” The context allows us to suppose that “it all” means corporate America in general, “a world in which insiders get to play by one set of rules—entree to Enron side partnerships that could turn minimal investments into millions overnight—while the unconnected and uninitiated pick up the bill.”

The complex process of Rich reasoning, always a delight to watch, takes us from the greed and corruption of corporate America, of which Enron is a sufficient witness, to the general corruption of the political process by money, since “all manner of creative accounting schemes took root in the corporate loophole land that was protected from reform in the 1990s by such inquisitors-come-lately as Joseph Lieberman and Billy Tauzin, both recipients of accounting-industry largess.” From there he proceeds to another bankruptcy, that of Global Crossing, in which the Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe is implicated, to the fact that Thomas White, Bush’s Secretary of the Army, got a \$10 million dollar payout when he left Enron, which was while the dubious accounting was going on. Hence, White “could legally exit with more than \$10 million of proceeds from an Enron division that, according to his colleagues, overstated its profits by hundreds of millions on Mr. White’s watch (he was vice chairman) and has since tossed overboard most of its employees.” From there we segue to a typical bit of mind-reading:

President Bush believes that his impressive stewardship of the war will make these stories go away, and so he chose not to mention the word Enron during his State of the Union address. But the country gets the picture now, and the more Dick Cheney tries to defend the secrecy of his energy policy task force, the more he sounds as arrogant and disingenuous as Linda Lay. No less an authority than John Dean has declared of Mr. Cheney’s stonewalling that “not since Richard Nixon stifled the

Congress during Watergate has a White House so openly, and arrogantly, defied Congress’s investigative authority.”

And *voilà*, we’re back to Watergate again! Q.E. damn well D., eh, Frank?

Mr. Rich, the master of political as well as other sorts of hyperbole, was far from being the only commentator with a global interpretation of the chicanery in the executive suites of Enron. The more high-minded version of the partisan political lesson to be drawn from Enron was given us by Michael Tomasky of *New York* magazine in *The Washington Post*:

Republicans contend that the Enron collapse is not a political scandal. It is merely, they say, a business scandal.

Actually it’s neither. Enron is a values scandal, and specifically a conservative values scandal. Far from being an accident, the Enron affair is the inevitable culmination of 20 years of agitation against government regulations, employee protections and other progressive policies that might have prevented, or at least softened, the blow. Ever since Ronald Reagan took office, conservatives have treated nearly all such regulations as manacles on corporate behavior, rather than as safeguards against corporate misbehavior. While it had help from some Democrats, the GOP in particular conflated its conservative philosophy of government with a conservative moral code, while creating an environment of corporate permissiveness in which an Enron was bound to happen.

You might think that some ingenuity was required to blame the Enron accounting scandal on Ronald Reagan, but similar sorts of reasoning were not far to seek from those in the press who, like the independent-minded Roy Marshall and David Olson, didn’t know much but did know what to think of “big corporations.” Particularly eloquent on America’s “corporate culture” were the corporate voices of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*:

Contemplating Enron's self-destructive arrogance [wrote the *Post* editorialist] Sen. Byron Dorgan has spoken quite accurately of "a culture of corporate corruption."

In time, historians may indeed choose Enron as a kind of symbol of the 1990s, much as Michael Milken's junk-bond empire has come to stand for the excesses of the preceding decade.

Similarly confident of its belief in the corruption of the "system" and not just of Enron was the *Times*'s editorialist:

The possibility of criminal prosecutions does not absolve Congress and federal regulators of their duty to reform the overall financial system. Regardless of whether crimes are ultimately proven, Enron's conduct already provides a primer on how current financial disclosure rules and accounting standards fail to protect investors adequately. No one should be lulled into believing that this was simply a case of sound rules being broken.

But whether the goal in mind was more regulation or that Holy Grail of the media culture, campaign finance reform, the political lever by which public inertia on this subject was to be moved was clear enough and put straightforwardly by Mike Allen in the *Post*:

As midterm elections approach, the investigations might keep a long, intense focus on a topic that Democrats see as a key GOP weakness: the perception by many voters that the Bush administration gives special access and help to wealthy people and big corporations. . . . "When you have George Bush, Enron, bankruptcy, Texas and campaign contributions all mixed together, it's a huge political problem for this administration," said Democratic Party spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri. "Attorney General [John D.] Ashcroft's decision [to recuse himself] shows just how spooked they are."

Ms. Palmieri was also busy supplying

quotes to Don Van Natta of *The New York Times*:

On Capitol Hill, Republicans and Democrats alike have pledged to work together to get to the bottom of the matter. Some Democratic officials also expressed glee that questions about White House influence peddling seemed to be emerging as a major political story of 2002.

"If their goal was to give this story a head of steam, they have succeeded," Jennifer Palmieri, the press secretary of the Democratic National Committee, said of the White House's handling of the Enron matter. "I think they are very spooked by this."

"Seemed to be emerging"? Seemed to whom? What influence peddling? Such questions obviously did not trouble Senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, whose attack on the Bush budget—approximately as mendacious as every other federal budget for the last thirty years—accused it of Enron-style accounting.

That the Democrats should be counting on making political gains by stressing the suggestive concatenation of "George Bush, Enron, bankruptcy, Texas and campaign contributions all mixed together," is hardly surprising. But that their rhetorical strategy is so easily and naturally adopted by the media as well is a testimony to the extent to which the media culture has sold its soul to the public opinion industry. How can we help it, they ask, if the Roys and the Davids that they never stop asking for their opinions never stop returning the opinions that previous generations of Roys and Davids, equally unchallenged, have passed on to them? The answer is that they can help it by putting truth and not opinion at the center of their focus. Of course they cannot do that because falsehood would accuse them of "bias." Besides, the reporting of innuendo, unlike that of truth, requires little or nothing in the way of reasoning powers or moral understanding, and journalism, like a polling sample, should be open to everybody.

A complete moral void

by David Pryce-Jones

Disbelief is the instinctive reaction to the double life of Anthony Blunt. One of the sons of the quite conventional chaplain of the embassy church in Paris. Attentive to his mother, Marlborough and Cambridge. Frequent long spells in France and Germany, fluent in the languages. Art historian and homosexual. Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, a natural for the Queen Mother's circle. This is close to a novelist's parody of a certain sort of highbrow career. And then betrayer of all that reassuring English stuff in favor of Stalin, foulest of murderers. The man, the Establishment he adorned, the country in which he was so eminent, dissolve into unreality. It seems simply too Jekyll and Hyde to be true.

Cyril Connolly once categorized Cambridge intellectuals as "cold radiator types," and those who knew Blunt affirm that he was the very coldest of radiators. Aloof, supercilious, arrogant, snobbish, priestly are among the adjectives he habitually attracted. He seemed to be consciously holding himself together, and at the same time apart. There were nevertheless people who liked him. Serious people too, drawn from the charmed circle where British public opinion forms and then congeals into dogma, for instance the poet Louis MacNeice, the art historian Ellis Waterhouse, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire, Cambridge academics like Dadie Rylands and John Hilton, and Lord and Lady Rothschild, heads of a family which needs no introduction. Smart or

left-leaning people of the period, their names so many high-stake social counters, they thought they recognized Blunt as one of their own kind. Many students at the Courtauld Institute of Art—Blunt's lifelong headquarters and Parthenon—admired him, and there were aesthetic lady hangers-on there in a daze of hapless devotion and unrequited love. Nobody, it turns out, knew more than the selective aspect of himself which Blunt allowed to filter through to each one of them. Disbelief was their reaction too when they understood how they had been cheated by him.

Miranda Carter also likes him, and in her new biography¹ she would rehabilitate him if she could. She gives herself away with many a glib sneer at public schools and hearties, at the stuck-in-the-mud intelligence services with their preference for dim colonial policemen, at the "forelock-tugging days" of the past, at the Thatcher era, and especially at the media whose response to Blunt's exposure towards the end of his life in her account amounts to assault and battery. It is late in the day now, but, in common with Blunt's friends and admirers, she is determined not to do anything so naively bourgeois as pass a moral judgment.

This attitude obliges her to labor long and hard, and in vain, over Blunt's supposed contradictions. Her point of depar-

¹ *Anthony Blunt: his lives* by Miranda Carter; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 590 pages, \$30.00.

ture is his "fundamental mysteriousness," which made him an "enigma" to all. She quotes much testimony to his coldness, only to go on to posit that he was "emotional, sentimental, gullible," which was how members of his family described themselves. Next moment, though, he shows "a weakness for absolutes." Later he is "holding on so tightly to a few certainties, so wary of his emotions." Then he has a "tendency to see the world in stark and obvious oppositions," and also "a fury at the older established world," as well as a fatal attraction to the dangerous, a desire to lose himself, a deliberate perversity and contrariness. Has she left out anything? Canonizing at speed into each other, these supposed traits generate with wonderful circularity that fundamental mysteriousness.

The evidence is here, though, for a much simpler and more obvious explanation. Blunt was a shit through and through. By definition, such a character takes for granted that whatever he feels like doing is quite all right, and the consequences to other people are no concern of his. Blunt's homosexuality involved the life-long abuse of intellectual and social inferiors, picked up and swiftly discarded once the rough-trade encounter was over. He drove his one long-term lover, the unfortunate John Gaskin—another social inferior treated with lofty contempt—to suicide. Treason was another abuse of anonymous people whom he despised. The personal and political betrayals are consistent. He cared nothing for human beings. Under the urbane and learned manner, the exterior courtliness, was a man free from moral considerations, selfish to the point of solipsism.

At Cambridge Blunt changed from a Twenties aesthete into a Thirties Marxist. The chrysalis out of which he and a number of other well-known Communists and fellow-travellers grew was a circle of self-admiring friends known as the Apostles. Members were invited to join in an atmosphere of slightly childish, elitist secrecy. Originally this was a Bloomsbury spin-off in

the university, deriving from the philosopher G. E. Moore, J. M. Keynes, the critic Desmond MacCarthy, and like-minded intellectuals who met to read each other's learned or light-hearted papers. Blunt and his generation transformed this circle into a Shits Anonymous where they talked themselves into eliminating the distinction between right and wrong. Mounting evidence of Soviet show-trials and terror passed Blunt by. Communism for him was all in the mind. Lack of political passion and remoteness from reality were the very qualities that were to make him so valuable to the Soviets.

Becoming art critic of *The Spectator*, then as now a conservative weekly, he was what John Pope-Hennessy—a rival art-historian, to be sure, but a man of inflexible scholarly standards—described as a "jejune Marxist journalist." Blunt's Communism was the most open of secrets. Published in 1937, *Letters from Iceland* by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice contains the witty and much-read poem they called "Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament." This includes the verse: "Item I leave my old friend Anthony Blunt/ A copy of Marx and £1000 a year/ And the picture of Love Locked Out by Holman Hunt." There is something hilarious about Blunt's adoption of Soviet realism, his inability to know what to think about Picasso and modernism, or his admiration of hack artists of the day, like the justly forgotten Peter Peri. Blunt's reputation as an art historian was overblown. His prose is a wrestling with obscurity. Even when it came to Poussin, the artist Blunt specially studied, Denis Mahon, a man proud to be considered primarily as a collector and dilettante, rang rings round him over dates and attributions.

Guy Burgess, arch-Apostle at Cambridge, recruited Blunt as a Soviet agent, and he in turn recruited Donald Maclean, John Cairncross, and the rest. His only known failures were with Michael Straight, the American millionaire who was to make a clean breast of it to the authorities in Washington and so first gave Blunt away,

and Goronwy Rees, for whom the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was too much to swallow. Rees took the initiative of exposing Blunt to Guy Liddell, a contact in British intelligence, but in that world of smoke and mirrors this official chose not to act on the information. Instead he bafflingly invited Rees to lunch with him and Blunt, and saw to it, probably at Blunt's instigation, that there was no investigation.

The war gave Blunt liberty to wander at will through MI5 and MI6, the two British intelligence services. The absence of systematic security checks speaks volumes about England as it then was. According to Soviet Intelligence archives, he passed over 1,770 documents between 1941 and 1945, though Burgess, Maclean, and Cairncross each passed over at least three times as many. Miranda Carter writes that Blunt probably did not have blood on his hands, but this is highly unlikely, and there is no way of knowing for certain. Anyone who believes that Blunt had integrity must explain why he accepted money as payment from the Soviets. Oleg Gordievsky, the one-time KGB resident in London and the highest ranking KGB officer ever to defect to the West, had the opportunity in the course of his duties in Moscow to read the record of these payments.

After the war Blunt was thought to have so exhausted himself with spying that his controller, Yuri Modin, recommended a good long rest. At the Courtauld and Buckingham Palace, there was nothing for Blunt to pass on. Without American intelligence, and the confession of Michael Straight in particular, Blunt might well never have been exposed. A deal was then struck with British intelligence. He would not be prosecuted if he too made a full confession. Unwisely, this left Blunt at liberty to extend the scope of his previous treason. Nobody could be sure at which point his confessions were full. In fact, he revealed only partially or falsely what he knew; he pretended that in helping the Soviets he had been merely a "premature anti-fascist" handing over

details of the German order of battle, information to which he actually had had no access; he succeeded in throwing suspicion on to former colleagues in intelligence like Guy Liddell and Roger Hollis, an even more senior officer; he tipped off Burgess and Maclean, who fled to Moscow; he cherished a protective admiration of Burgess to the end; he drove Goronwy Rees to a breakdown; and long after he was supposed to be "clean" he was the channel for slipping £5,000 of KGB cash to Philby. The novelist and art historian Anita Brookner was one of his Courtauld fans, only to discover that she had been one among others manipulated by him without her knowledge to deliver a message to a KGB agent. Regrets or apologies were as alien to him as scruples.

The intelligence services struck a deal, in Miranda Carter's view, to cloak a record of unmitigated incompetence. That deal certainly consummated a disaster at least as damaging to national self-confidence in Britain as the Suez crisis, diffusing the lasting sense that the country was irretrievably in decline, the institutions of government deliquescent in the hands of people altogether unfitted to run them.

Little or none of this, needless to say, is deemed worthy of the attention of most of this biography's reviewers. Writing in *The New Yorker*, for instance, the novelist Julian Barnes treats Blunt's career as a jolly lark which somehow came unstuck. "Spy always rhymes with lie," he winks knowingly. Stoic as Blunt proved in disgrace, he "was always well short of nobility," but the day may come, Barnes thinks, when Blunt will appear as an idealist who backed the losing side. Jeremy Treglown went far further in *The New York Times Book Review*, praising Blunt as one of the most powerful figures in the art world after the Second War, retrieving little anecdotes about his looks and his friends, and underscoring his belief that "Communism was both a moral idea and a practical source for good." His relationship to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt—the nineteenth-century opponent of the British empire—

homosexuality, appeasement of Hitler, the Spanish civil war, Treglown finds, "were among the more defensible reasons Blunt joined those who decided to work for the Soviets"—itself a warm euphemism for treason. As with Carter's book, toadying of this sort can be written only by people for whom there is no longer a valid distinction between right and wrong.

The United States won the Cold War, and once again saved Europe from itself. Throughout the period, apologia for Communism was widespread among intellectuals. The brute facts about the Soviet Union were always available, but many people found many reasons to deceive themselves and others about its true nature. Some apologists, for example Philby, were after power and privilege in the Soviet future they envisaged; others, for example Burgess, were opportunists or simply corrupt. Blunt was in a category all of his own. When reality almost caught up with him, and his Soviet controller advised him to escape while he could to Moscow, he was horrified. My dear, the people, and the discomfort. Self-righteousness had enabled him to live out his life in a complete moral void. Nothing, not even public disgrace, touched him. Had the Soviet Union won the Cold War, Blunt would have helped to bring about a world with no place in it for him, and which he would have hated. That is the fundamental mystery.

A contented mandarin

Gerald Weissmann Darwin's Audubon: Science and the Liberal Imagination. Perseus, 354 pages, \$28.95, \$17 paper

reviewed by Anthony Daniels

Of all literary genres, the essay is perhaps the best known and most widely despised. This is probably because few people reach the end of their education without having been forced to write essays upon subjects of no interest whatever to them, and of pre-

cious little interest to their teachers either. For a long time after I left school the word "essay" connoted for me the instruction to compare and contrast, at quite unnatural length and for purposes completely opaque, the characters of Banquo and Macduff. It was a long time before I wanted to read or write an essay again.

But brevity is the soul of wit, and there is often truer intellect in the distillation needed in the writing of an essay than in the compilation of every known or discoverable fact about the subject of a biography. It is better that a reader should wish an essay were longer than that a biography were shorter. In good writing, what is left out is at least as important as what is included.

In recent years, there have been a more than usual number of elegant scientist- and doctor-essayists: Lewis Thomas, Oliver Sacks, Steven Jay Gould, and Richard Lewontin, for example. Gerald Weissmann, a rheumatologist at the New York University School of Medicine, is of their company. They write much better than many of their more literary confreres, perhaps because science of necessity clears the mind while literary theory—the Dutch elm disease of the humanities—of necessity addles it.

Professor Weissmann's interests and learning are wide ranging and straddle C. P. Snow's two cultures as if there were no gulf at all between them. He writes with equal facility of Charles Darwin and Honoré Daumier, of liposomes and literature, of immunology and impasto. He is also a humane and decent man, and his outrage at the wretched fate of incurable psychiatric patients, heartlessly discharged from institutions, is both unfeigned and justified. He is quite right to see in Michel Foucault, the intellectual inspirer of our policy of neglect in the community, a narcissist more interested in the admiration of his peers than in the practical effect of his ideas upon the lives of others.

The subtitle of the book hints that its total is greater than the sum of its parts, that there is an underlying general idea that informs and is illustrated by each of the es-

says. Certainly, Professor Weissmann is a man of the Enlightenment: he believes that humanity is capable of improving its lot by the exercise of its rational faculties, the finest flower of which is science. Health is better than illness, knowledge is better than ignorance, wealth is better than poverty, freedom is better than slavery: these are the author's "liberal" beliefs. Whether it would be easy to find anyone who disagreed with them is, of course, an open question. Perhaps the nearest he comes to finding an enemy with whom to disagree and against whom to argue is in those irrationalists who claim, absurdly, that science is merely one socially constructed discourse among others, such that there is nothing to distinguish—as far as their truth claims are concerned—alchemy from chemistry and astrology from astronomy.

Weissmann's philosophy does not get us very far, however, and he has a habit of avoiding the really difficult questions that his essays raise. The trouble begins even in the introduction where he tells us that he is an admirer and even follower of the meliorist Fabians, among them Shaw, Wells, and the Webbs. For him, these people are rational reformers who would make the world a better place. But their record was equivocal, to say the least. Shaw, for example, was not just a crank, but an evangelizing crank, who would have had us all dress in Jaeger woollens for health reasons. His criterion of the truth of a statement was whether he had made it himself; having first been an admirer of Mussolini, he came to the conclusion that there was no famine in the Soviet Union because he was personally well-fed there. Whenever I read Shaw, I cannot get out of my mind what Chekhov wrote in a letter in 1890 about Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata":

[I]t has one [defect] for which one cannot readily forgive the author—that is, the audacity with which Tolstoy holds forth about what he doesn't know and is too obstinate to care to understand. Thus his statements about

syphilis . . . and so on, are not merely open to dispute, but show him up to be an ignoramus who has not, in the course of his long life, taken the trouble to read two or three books written by specialists.

Shaw was like Tolstoy in this respect—minus the genius.

The causes that Wells espoused ranged from compulsory sterilization and the complete reorganization of society to the destruction of Rome by bombing. The Webbs's greatest achievement was undoubtedly their description of Stalin's Russia as the most democratic country on earth: thus displaying a faith that makes pilgrims to Lourdes seem like hard-bitten materialists.

All who are rationalist, therefore, are not rational, and it is a moot point whether it would be preferable to be ruled by these Fabians than by a bizarre Latin American military dictator. Indeed, Weissmann slides away from the difficult question of why, after so much technical and material progress, mankind finds itself very little happier than before. At one point, Weissmann implies that, with further scientific research, we shall get to understand ourselves better: for, as he optimistically remarks in the hope and expectation of further progress,

there are *some* facts of mental science that already bid fair to become as timeless as [Boyle's] law of perfect gases . . . that general paresis is due to the spirochete of syphilis, that Alzheimer's disease is associated with neurofibrillary tangles in the brain, or that lead drove the hatter mad.

Actually, it wasn't lead, it was mercury, but let it pass: the fact is that man's self-understanding, except for the most obviously medical of disturbances, hasn't advanced one jot or tittle since Shakespeare's day. In fact, insofar as the entertainment that the groundlings consume nowadays is of incomparably lower quality, such self-understanding may be said to have retrogressed rather than advanced. And if Hume was right that reason is the slave of the passions,

the place of reason in human affairs needs a much subtler analysis than Weissmann is able to provide.

The looseness of his thought, in which a general (and genuine) benevolence often stands in for precision, is evident in his treatment of equality, a value that he believes is threatened by the doctrines of sociobiology. Nowhere does he say what he means by equality, though he several times praises it: he surely cannot mean that all men are equal in their abilities. The only sense in which equality does no violence to obvious empirical fact and does not incite to mayhem and mass murder is formal equality before the law, that is to say an ethical equality that no allegedly empirical doctrine such as sociobiology could undermine.

Moreover, Weissmann sometimes appears to suggest that sociobiology is objectionable because of its ethical implications. This is perilously close to the Stalinist rejection (which the author elsewhere correctly but uncontroversially condemns) of genetic science because it was incompatible with the ideological doctrines of the day. It is wrong to reject an empirical truth because of its alleged implications. Sociobiology should be rejected not because, if true, it would have corollaries we don't like, but because it provides a woefully, indeed laughably, inadequate account of human life, experience, and history.

Although Weissmann is in favor of equality, his tone is sometimes that of a contented mandarin. His achievements in more than one important sphere of human activity are undoubtedly great, but self-satisfaction is rarely edifying to contemplate, either in life or in print: and when he says, in an otherwise interesting article about Gertrude Stein (a minor literary figure, after all) that "she changed forever the way we read the English language," I am inclined to wonder who this "we" actually is: *le tout* Georgetown, perhaps, or *le tout* MLA? The statement seems more to serve the function of establishing caste than enunciating truth.

If I have so far criticized Weissmann, it is because he is a man of talent and erudition, to whom the highest standards might be applied. At his best, he is very good. His essay on Oliver Wendell Holmes (the doctor father of the judge) is elegant and informative. Holmes—after whom Sherlock was named—was a pioneer of anaesthesia and also the first person to establish that the dreaded childbirth fever from which so many mothers died in Victorian hospitals was actually a contagion spread, *inter alia*, by doctors. He was also a noted literary man, without whose *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* no second-hand bookshop in the English-speaking world can be found. Holmes's ideas about childbirth fever were obstinately opposed by some of the greatest names in the field, and Weissmann quotes Holmes's eloquent appeal to be heard:

I am too much in earnest for either humility or vanity, but I do entreat those who hold the keys of life and death to listen to me also for this once. I ask no personal favor; but I beg to be heard on behalf of the women whose lives are at stake, until some stronger voice shall plead for them.

These are noble words, in which the frustration of a person who rightly knows that he is right, but is thwarted by conservatism of the most mulish, intransigent, and self-interested kind, can be detected.

Weissmann is best when he is at his most straightforwardly historical. The essay on Ludwik Fleck, a Polish-Jewish immunologist who did research on typhus in the war-time camps, who was kept alive by the Germans because of his technical knowledge, and who before the war had published an interesting philosophical treatise on the nature of scientific research, is a model of its kind. It is a work of genuine piety about a man who deserves not to be forgotten, but otherwise might be.

A book is worth reading if it has qualities or parts that repay the effort of discerning them. *Darwin's Audubon* is worth reading.

Houses of repute

Johanna Fiedler Molto Agitato: The Mayhem Behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera.
Doubleday, 393 pages, \$30

Norman Lebrecht Covent Garden: The Untold Story (Dispatches from the English Culture War, 1945–2000).
Northeastern University Press,
580 pages, \$37.50

John Ardoin Valery Gergiev and the Kirov: A Story of Survival.
Amadeus Press, 296 pages, \$34.95

reviewed by Alexander Coleman

Decades ago Sir Peter Ustinov was called upon to write an introduction to an amusing anthology about calamities that have occurred in the major opera houses of the West—appropriately entitled *Great Operatic Disasters*. Sir Peter began with a memorable definition: “There is no art form which attempts the sublime while defying the ridiculous with quite the foolhardiness of opera.” The book is full of misbehaving horses, dentures lost in the stage gloom, grotesquely misclad baritones, Rigoletto’s hump gradually slipping down the hapless singer’s back (“One would have thought that they *knew* something about handling hunchbacks in Paris”). And this is not even to begin to consider the quality of the singing, of which Ustinov gives us a few classifications: “Those who can sing but can’t act . . . those who can act but who can no longer sing . . . those paragons who can both sing and act . . . and finally, those who can neither act nor sing, retained in harness by some humanitarian pension scheme.”

It must be said that the proper execution of what Wagner used to call the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the bringing together of drama, song, dance, and instrumental sound, is a high-risk operation at the best of times. Even a ballet evening can go wrong for the most modest of reasons. The Associated Press recently reported that, at London’s

elegant Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, about two-thousand ballet fans had to be evacuated after a baked potato exploded in a backstage microwave oven and triggered the fire alarm.

Any major opera house can expect to have its history recounted, and three of the world’s most important have received treatment in recent books: the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (ROH), and the Kirov Opera in St. Petersburg.

Johanna Fiedler certainly knows her way around the world of music. She is the daughter of the Boston Pops conductor Arthur Fiedler, and in her previous book, *Arthur Fiedler: Papa, the Pops, and Me*, she gave us a frank view of her irascible father, who was continually humbled by the BSO’s Serge Koussevitzky. She was also the Metropolitan Opera’s general press representative from 1975–1989 and had the fullest possible cooperation of archivists, critics, singers, agents, board members, and, of course, the general manager Joseph Volpe and the artistic director James Levine.

Ms. Fiedler had no pretensions to writing a serious overview of the history of the Met before her arrival. After all, Irving Kolodin had produced a massive history of the institution, *The Metropolitan Opera 1883–1966: A Candid History*, of well over seven-hundred pages, covering the history of the house before Lincoln Center. Hers is a personal scrutiny of the Met as she knew it. The present music director, James Levine, first appeared on the Met podium in 1971 as a young twenty-eight-year-old wunderkind. Understandably, given his achievements, he is the central figure in the latter parts of her book.

Molto Agitato is not a book about singing, but rather a story about “operatic” struggles within the Met’s management and about performers facing each other and management down. In their respective battles with exasperated general managers, both Maria Callas and Kathleen Battle were to be summarily fired for behavioral excess—the lesson being that even great singers can only

go so far. All sorts of other conflicts are recounted herein—between the board and general manager, between singers, between the orchestra and management, even between the orchestra and their beloved conductor: Levine has been known to wing it. “One mild complaint,” Ms. Fiedler writes, “is that Jimmy sight-reads the scores at first rehearsals for operas he has never done before. After the first rehearsal for one Met premiere, he praised the orchestra. ‘That was very good for a first run-through,’ he said, and one of the musicians replied, under his breath, ‘We could say the same to you.’” Nonetheless, the Volpe/Levine years are much celebrated here, and deservedly so. In her treatment of Maestro Levine, she is frank, but I wonder what kind of biting, untrammelled critical study might have resulted if *Molto Agitato* had not been written by an observer who is so obviously a supremely loyal former member of the Met staff.

Two matters ought to be mentioned in reference to the Met that contrast it to the other two houses under the microscope. The Met has always been funded by private generosity, beginning with the largesse of Otto Kahn, Eleanor Robson Belmont, and Cornelius Bliss, then with the ever more energetic fundraising from the Metropolitan Opera Guild and the popular Saturday afternoon broadcasts, and on to the cultivation of generous individual benefactors, such as Sybil Harrington and Alberto Vilar. Ticket prices have never been cheap, though standing room was and is a bargain. The point is that the government never enters *Molto Agitato* as a subject of concern or preoccupation, whereas, for the other two opera houses under consideration, Whitehall (after the Labour Party victory in July 1945) and Moscow (before and after the Soviet years) are essential topics. The second point is that while ballet is entirely subsidiary to operatic production at the Met, the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and the Mariinsky/Kirov Ballet are immensely powerful presences in the scheduling and administration of both the British and Russian companies.

Not only is Covent Garden another kind of opera house, but Mr. Norman Lebrecht is quite another kind of critic. He is an outsider, an intruder into the sacred temple of classical music, a wild man, even. As a freewheeling music columnist for London’s *Daily Telegraph* and the author of the much discussed *Maestro Myth* (1991) and *When the Music Stops* (1997; published in the United States under the more appropriate title *Who Killed Classical Music? Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics*), he can be fairly described as music criticism’s only cultural guerrilla—there is no one comparable to him in the United States (see his weekly *Telegraph* articles at www.scena.org). What is more, he is the host of a weekly interactive BBC Radio 3 talk show, “Lebrecht Live,” in which unprepared participants, expecting the rattling of teacups, find themselves challenged, scrutinized, and criticized, if not excoriated, in ways that poor little NPR here in the U. S. OF A. can only fantasize about. Indeed, after reading anew *Who Killed Classical Music?*, I can only imagine what was left on the cutting room floor after the legal vetting. Mr. Lebrecht took on the titans of classical music management and showed how the concentration of “stars”—the “Three Tenors” being only the worst example—has crowded out even the most distinguished young talent, vocal and instrumental.

The subtitle of Mr. Lebrecht’s history of the ROH—“Dispatches from the English Cultural War, 1945–2000”—is indicative of the social breadth of his inquiry. His grand theme—the role of government in arts dissemination and the ultimate failure of such a program—starts with Churchill’s stunning defeat by Labour in the summer of 1945. With its cities in ruins, a shabbily dressed populace, and food and fuel rationing that would last ten years more, Britain had won the war and lost the peace. All the more remarkable, therefore, was the intense cultural messianism advocated by the new government. It created the Arts Council, reinforced the dedication of the BBC Third Programme to music, and began the sup-

port of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. Much of this was due to the superhuman energies and fine political hand of John Maynard Keynes and his ballerina wife, Lydia Lopokova. In a radio address, Keynes intoned: "We look forward to a time when the theatre and the concert hall and the gallery will be a living element in everyone's upbringing." England would rise again alright, but much more enlightened from its economic Dunkirk. "The arts—the creative voice of the nation—were from now on to be a paternal concern of central government." Keynes was the first to occupy the Arts Council chair—he rescued the opera house from the dance hall that it was during the war and married ballet irrevocably to the future Royal Opera House with the help of the imperious Dame Ninette de Valois (née Edris Stannis). Keynes was followed over the years by Ernest Pooley, Sir Kenneth Clark, and most significantly, Garrett Moore, Eleventh Earl of Drogheda, who lasted from 1959–1974.

Mr. Lebrecht's 580-page inquiry asks a simple question: How could an innocent governmental subvention of £25,000 in 1945, which aided in the official re-opening of the ROH on February 20, 1946, end with the two-year closure of the house in the late Nineties for complete renovations costing some £214 million? The story, as one observer put it, is "the longest running arts farce" in the nation's history. One crucial element in all this, not noted by Mr. Lebrecht until page 494, was that donations to the arts in Britain were *not* tax deductible until the Inland Revenue law was changed in 2000. And state subsidies, while new to Britain in 1945, were and are still meager compared to those doled out in Germany. The Munich Opera House is supported by a 70 percent state subsidy, a sum inconceivable to the Exchequer no matter whether Tory or Labour resided at No. 11.

But after all this, one can still understand Mr. Lebrecht's ultimate exasperation when he notes that, because of innumerable delays over the years, the stage technology of

the new house is already thirty years out of date, and seat-back subtitles, so pleasing at the Met, "had never been considered at Covent Garden, nor mentioned to the architect." (It was just announced that the indefatigably charitable Alberto Vilar will pick up the tab for the installation of seat-back titles at the new Covent Garden.)

Mr. Lebrecht was granted only "partial access" to the ROH archives. Indeed, when he wished to examine the archive file on Arnold Goodman, Harold Wilson's right-hand man and "the most influential fixer England had ever seen," Mr. Lebrecht drily notes that "With his usual skill, Goodman left no fingerprints. His file in the ROH archives is completely empty, cleared as if by order." Secrets must be guarded fanatically, even if they are anodyne and harmless:

Before I could enter the archives, the board demanded that I obtain the approval of all past chairmen, one of whom refused access to the files pertaining to his period. I would later discover that he had little to hide. His response was typically that of an ROH grantee who saw no reason for the public to know what had been going on while he was in charge of a public-funded institution.

The appointment of the first General Administrator of the house, David Webster, 1945–1970, was symptomatic of the way things were to be. Once the manager of the Bon Marché department store in Liverpool and active in local music circles, Webster was drawn to London and told by the powers that be "to organize a national home for opera and ballet." An authoritarian musical amateur, Webster demanded total musical control, and it is appropriate to list the musical directors he would not consider: Beecham, Barbirolli, Malcolm Sargent, Albert Coates, Klemperer, Szell, Reiner, Erich Kleiber, and others. The young Leonard Bernstein conducted once in 1946 and was never invited back. "Any of these masters," Mr. Lebrecht notes, "was capable of raising an opera house from the foundations up, yet none was considered

for Covent Garden." Webster chose an unknown Austrian exile: one Karl Rankl, unknown to all. Beecham's reaction was typical: "The appointment of an alien, and especially one bearing a German name, to the post of musical director of the British National Opera is so incredible that I have from time to time to remind myself that it has actually happened and is not some fantastic dream." The curse of provincialism initially hung over the house. The bracing slogan to "Buy British," that is, to use British singers over their better French, German, or Austrian counterparts made the first years of the ROH unnecessarily grim.

Yet after the expected demise of Karl Rankl, there have been many extraordinary triumphs. A list should include Erich Kleiber's *Wozzeck*, many stunning performances by Callas and Sutherland, the eras dominated by George Solti (a complete *Ring*, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*), Rafael Kubelik, Colin Davis, and Bernard Haitink, as well as the rise to stardom of Kiri Te Kanawa and Luciano Pavarotti. As for the Royal Ballet, one only need mention Dame Margot Fonteyn and her collaborations with Rudolf Nureyev and the choreography of Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, and Kenneth MacMillan. But the deficits grew to gargantuan proportions, much to the irritation and censure of the likes of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Thanks to a generous infusion of funds from the National Lottery, the renovation was brought to a happy end, but the massive endowment needed for its independence has yet to be raised.

The most stunning sentence in Mr. Lebrecht's entire history is pronounced by Lord Drogheda. George Whyte was a young Hungarian-Jewish department store owner who offered to take charge of desperately needed fundraising for the ROH in exchange for a seat on the board. This was deemed to be too pushy an offer, and Drogheda offered a symptomatic, summary chastisement: "Never forget, George, what is an Englishman's by privilege, the Jew has to acquire by merit."

A few words about the late John Ardoin. At his death in March 2001, he had just retired after thirty-two years as the music critic of *The Dallas Morning News*. He was a well-esteemed presence in New York city music circles, as intermission guest on the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, and as New York critic for *The Times* (of London) and *Opera* magazine. He was the author of some six books, two on Callas—*The Callas Legacy* and *Callas at Juilliard*, the latter work inspiring the playwright Terrence McNally to write his *Master Class*—and the definitive examination of the recorded legacy of Wilhelm Furtwängler. Ardoin was an extraordinarily honest critic—he wrote an unfavorable review of a performance by his friend Maria Callas in Dallas in 1974, and she never spoke to him again. He had just finished *Valery Gergiev and the Kirov* when he died suddenly from lymphoma. Had he lived, his next project was to have been an exhaustive examination of the recorded legacy of Leonard Bernstein.

Ardoin was nothing if not intrepid. Taking leave from the Dallas paper in 1995–96, he moved to St. Petersburg for the long winter in order to bear witness to the fortunes of the Mariinsky/Kirov theater. He enjoyed the complete cooperation of Valery Gergiev, the principal conductor and artistic director, and brought with him a friend who spoke fluent Russian. The archives of the house were open to Ardoin, should he be able to locate them. "The Mariinsky's historical papers and the designs of past productions have been scattered about town in at least a half a dozen buildings, and some had even wound up in Moscow." Indefatigable, Ardoin has given us four books in one—a portrait of the mercurial Gergiev, now a whirlwind presence in New York though his myriad activities at the Metropolitan Opera and performances with his own Kirov orchestra; a history of the theater since 1860; the personal journey of a Westerner learning a balletic and operatic repertory not often seen or heard in the West; and, finally, the story of an opera and ballet company desperately struggling in

post-Communist Russia, bereft of the state support that had been dependable through the czars and Communists.

Ardoïn sat through every performance possible—twenty-six different operas and twenty-eight ballets (all repeated, of course), four tours of Europe, and trips to Israel, Japan, and Denmark. Often, the stars were sent on tour and the vocal “Plan B” stayed home to perform, at times desultorily. There are three discrete orchestras—a ballet orchestra, an opera orchestra, and a tour orchestra, with personnel rotating among the three. For Ardoïn, as for the reader, it is all dizzying in the extreme.

Ardoïn’s gifts as a musical critic—able to describe in words the peculiar power, majesty, or delicacy of each singer—make this a real treat for the inquiring musician and critic. Ardoïn’s ear for orchestral sonority and the ensemble in general is evident in his portrayals of the sound of an individual orchestra, and he roundly condemns some performances. For instance, after hearing nightly the vibrancy, oomph, and general dedication of the Kirov orchestra on their home grounds in St. Petersburg, Ardoïn takes a flying trip to New York, accompanying Gergiev to the Met, where he will conduct Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades*. The much-vaunted Metropolitan Orchestra does not fare well:

While the playing of the Met’s orchestra was beautiful, precise, and professional, it lacked that hot-to-the-touch character of the Kirov’s brass, tympani, and strings. Nor did The Met’s musicians play with the sense of propulsion, the 100 percent plus the Kirov orchestra gives Gergiev night after night. The production was a grave disappointment.

An additional bonus to this extraordinary book is Ardoïn’s capacities, previously unknown to me, as a critic, appreciator, and describer of ballet performance. One has only to read his descriptions of particular performances of new (to Russia) works of Balanchine, and such old dependables as *La Bayadère*, *Le Corsaire*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or

The Sleeping Beauty, to know how far-ranging were Ardoïn’s interests and talents, and what a loss his unexpected death is to the art of criticism.

In September 1997, Valery Gergiev was appointed principal guest conductor of the Metropolitan Opera. The final pages of both volumes by Johanna Fiedler and John Ardoïn dedicate a good amount of ink as to the motives, hidden or obvious, behind such an appointment, and spend even more time contrasting the temperaments and conductorial and rehearsal techniques of Messrs. Gergiev and Levine—the latter tending toward the energetically Apollonian, the former much wilder, unpredictable, and very Dionysian. Ardoïn, clearly the more discerning student of orchestral performance, tended to prefer Gergiev in spite of his helter-skelter habits, while Ms. Fiedler is, naturally, a Levine friend and advocate. There is, however, a moment in her book in which she crosses the line into something close to scurrilous hearsay. She quotes a “Met insider” alleging that “With his icy shrewdness in assessing other conductors, Jimmy knows that the orchestra has little use for Gergiev. Jimmy knows Gergiev is a fraud, and either everyone else will catch on or they won’t.” Who is this “Met insider?” I am sorry that John Ardoïn is not around to confront the wretch.

Such is the nature of writing about the opera world: gossip, ego, power struggles, etc. It disappears into the gloom when the curtain rises and the music begins.

The seventh seal

Elaine Feinstein Ted Hughes:
The Life of a Poet.

W. W. Norton, 273 pages, \$29.95

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

In recent years, as constraints have been lifted, the secrets surrounding the marriage of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath—the most brilliant literary couple since the Brownings

and the Woolfs—have gradually been revealed. Plath's mother, Aurelia, died in 1994, Hughes in 1998. His sister, Olwyn, who resented Plath's beauty and talent, and who was intensely jealous of her intimacy with Hughes, no longer controls Plath's estate, enforcing her self-serving version of the truth and forcing biographers to submit to her diktat. Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, his long-delayed response to Plath's shocking attacks in the *Ariel* poems, came out in 1998. Erica Wagner has written *Ariel's Gift* (2000), a valuable study of these poems. Plath's complete *Journals*—with 400 new pages—appeared to great acclaim in 2000.

This literary equivalent of the opening of the seventh seal should have been a godsend to the first biographer (others are also at work) of Ted Hughes. Now, at last, the major questions may be answered: what caused the breakup of their marriage, why did Plath kill herself; who brought up their children, what were Hughes's relations with them, what sort of lives did they have; why did he leave Plath for Assia Wevill, why did she also commit suicide (outdoing Plath by killing their child as well); what sort of marriage did he have with Carol Orchard, was she aware of his many love affairs, and, if so, how did she respond to them? But this brief, superficial and deeply disappointing biography by Elaine Feinstein, a poet and friend of Hughes, fails to answer—or even ask—most of these crucial queries.

After a childhood in the wilds of Yorkshire and a stint in the RAF, Hughes felt uneasy among the Cambridge literati. His sudden switch from English to anthropology was prompted by the dream he later described in "The Thought-Fox," in which the animal placed its bloody paw on Hughes's blank page and said: "Stop this—you are destroying us." Feinstein fails to see the influence of D. H. Lawrence's story "The Fox," in which a symbolic animal imparts feral wisdom to a man, or to link it to the fox-cub episode in "Epiphany" in *Birthday Letters*. When, at the beginning of his marriage, Hughes told his brother that Sylvia "was his own 'luck,'" he

also echoed Lawrence's compliment to Jessie Chambers, who had succeeded in placing his first poems with the *English Review*. Feinstein doesn't connect what Plath called his sulky "white-hot silences" with her jealous rage when she saw him walking with an attractive student: "his smile became . . . too white-hot, became fatuous, admiration-seeking."

Feinstein is very weak on Hughes's poems; one would never know, from her discussion, that he was a major author. She devotes only one page to his brilliant first book, *Hawk in the Rain*, and offers banalities like "the wish to continue living was in accord with the whole universe." She loyally defends his Poet Laureate poems, but she doesn't see how ludicrously inappropriate (even humiliating) it was for the poet who had described animals tearing at the entrails of their prey to celebrate the ill-fated royal wedding of Fergie and Prince Andrew in "The Honey Bee and the Thistle" (1986). Though she admits that his eccentric book on Shakespeare was roundly condemned, she asserts (in another meaningless generalization) that his prose "is among the finest of the twentieth century." She's similarly inadequate when dealing with Plath's poems. She misses the influence of Frost's "Design" on "Widow," *The Waste Land* and the Biblical resurrection of Lazarus on "Mirror," and the personal significance of the funeral yews (a homonym for "Hughes") in the cemetery adjacent to their garden in Devon: "And the message of the yew tree is blackness—blackness and silence."

Hughes's study of anthropology led to a lifelong passion for mysticism, spiritualism and the occult: for a trashy hodge-podge of astrology and alchemy, black magic and witchcraft, Rosicrucianism and Jungianism, Ouija boards, tarot cards, and séances. Feinstein doesn't say whether Hughes actually believed all this stuff, but he certainly used it to explain Plath's irrational behavior and to exculpate himself. When she was strung "tight as a wire," he blamed not his own white-hot silences, but the relation of the Moon and Saturn. In *Birthday Letters* he

argued that her suicide was not triggered by his adultery, but predestined.

Plath's Germanic parents engendered in her a Teutonic rigor and seriousness, a relentless egoism and intellectual competitiveness, a character that was selfish, difficult and pathological. (Her literary persona, though caustically funny, is strangely repellent.) Cambridge friends spoke of her ebullient but rather false "Doris Day mask," Hughes mentioned her "death-ray quality," and even Plath exclaimed: "how could anyone else stand me!" He always helped with the children and the household chores, but when he was writing she would interrupt him more than a hundred times in one morning.

When jealous, as she often was, she destroyed his possessions: first his cufflinks and his book on witches, then his precious volume of Shakespeare and all his work in progress. Finally, she made a bonfire of all the papers in his study. Plath, playing on his name, had always described him as "huge," but when he betrayed her, she felt he had "become a little man." His commitment to their marriage was limited, hers was absolute (she never slept with anyone else after he left her), and she was destroyed by his infidelity. As she told a friend, with awful finality: "When you give your heart to somebody, you can't take it back. If they don't want it, it's gone." Hughes's betrayal hurt her into poetry. But he later admitted, when overcome by guilt: "It doesn't fall to many men to murder a genius."

Plath—whose father died deliberately, as she saw it, by ignoring his curable disease—feared abandonment and could not bear rejection. Her poems ruthlessly exposed her own terrors; Hughes *knew*, better than anyone else, that she was mentally unstable and suicidal. But her desperate hope for reconciliation with Hughes, love for her two small children (put at great risk by the gas that killed her), and even the joyous fulfillment of her poetry could not sustain her. The perilous balance between the controlled mania that fueled the creativity of her final months and the mad frenzy that propelled

her to suicide was finally destroyed. She may have thought her poems had stopped forever, or that the strain of creating them had become intolerable, or that if they didn't continue she couldn't bear to live, or that she was heading for another—permanent—mental crash, for which the poems were a warning and a reward. By killing herself she turned her best material over to Hughes: her infants, her torment, and her poems. Like the relics of a medieval saint, Plath's letters and diaries have been sold, stolen, hidden, dispersed, and destroyed.

The predatory and seductive Assia Wevill, the femme fatale of this tragedy, was much more beautiful and glamorous than Sylvia. She had cheated death by narrowly escaping the Nazi extermination camps, and she seemed to be living on borrowed time. Assia was haunted by her rival, even believed she saw her ghost. Hughes blamed her for Plath's death by exclaiming: "You are the dark destructive force that destroyed Sylvia." Just as Hughes had bitterly regretted his failure to see Plath's great danger at the end of her life, so he also failed to help Assia at her crucial moment. When she spoke to him on the telephone on the afternoon of her suicide (also by gas), "he failed to give her the reassurance she needed."

Einstein refuses to delve deeply into the issues she chooses to discuss. How did Hughes (like the young Hemingway) acquire the reputation of a writer before he'd published anything? Who was Rosemary Joseph, "already part of his life" in Cambridge? What did he think of Plath's brother, Warren, when they first met? How, precisely, did American literature inspire Hughes's poetry? The extremism of Lowell's confessional outbursts certainly tore Hughes away from the polite formulations of the English Movement poets, but his poetry seems closer to John Clare's ferocious "Badger" and to Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* than to anything by Ransom or Wilbur. How did Hughes, following the risky tradition of Pound and Auden, translate poems from languages he didn't

know? What was the nature of his close friendship with Seamus Heaney? How was Hughes's interest in the occult dangerous to Plath's delicate psychic makeup? Why did he never touch his infant son, Nicholas, and what effect did this have on the child? What was so disturbing, shortly before Plath's suicide, about the animal odor of her hair? Normally squeaky clean, she was now deeply depressed. She frightened off Al Alvarez as well as Doris Lessing, who also "drew back from the desperation she sensed underneath Sylvia's animation." Was Plath's suicide, as Anne Sexton caustically suggested, "her greatest career move?"

Feinstein doesn't even begin to explore the effect on her marriage of Sylvia's relations with Aurelia. Her "Electra on the Azalea Path," about the horrific visit to her father's grave, is also a severe judgment on Aurelia Plath. Aurelia, from whom Sylvia was trying to escape by living in England, accompanied the couple on part of their honeymoon, witnessed in Devon the dissolution of their marriage, and urged Sylvia to get a divorce when it was the last thing she really wanted. Only after Sylvia had destroyed the part of her mother in herself, rejected Aurelia's oppressive concepts of work, love, marriage, home, and family, and stanching the hemorrhage of gratitude, could she finally express her hatred of her parents, as well as of her husband, in the *Ariel* poems.

Since Plath died without a will, Hughes took control of her estate and brought out most of her works posthumously. His triple authority as husband, poet, and critic—expressed in at least fourteen essays, introductions, notes, and letters about Plath—profoundly influenced our understanding of her life and art. Plath had destroyed his manuscripts when they were separated; he said he destroyed hers after her death. In his introduction to the expurgated editions of her *Journals*, Hughes disingenuously wrote: "I destroyed [one notebook] because I did not want her children to have to read it." The earlier one, which she kept while writing *Ariel*, "disappeared more recently and may, presumably, still turn up."

Feinstein does not question these dubious statements, though Plath's children, of course, did *not* "have to read it." Surely if Hughes had been so concerned about his children's welfare, he would have taken better care of Plath instead of running off with Assia. But he may well have kept the precious journals, instead of destroying them, and lied about the lost notebook to throw scholars off the scent. They may still exist—kept hidden by his widow or his children—and their appearance would radically change our view of Plath's relations with Hughes and her intensely creative final months.

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The “deliberate sense” of Willmoore Kendall

by Jeffrey Hart

It was a leisurely drive up from green and ocher Catalonia through the border town of Port-Bou to Paris, where I had an approximate date to visit Willmoore Kendall. I had read much of what he had written and arrived at the view that he was an extraordinarily astute political theorist, but he also turned out to be the most drastic personality I had ever met. I never met Nietzsche, of course, or Thorstein Veblen or Charles Sanders Peirce, but you get the idea. Not surprisingly, there are characters based on him in a novella by Saul Bellow and in novels by Sidney Zion and Bill Buckley.

As I drove across France, I was well aware of the Kendall legend. He had been a young Rhodes Scholar, a disciple of Leo Strauss, and had early written an important book on John Locke and majority-rule theory. Taken on with tenure in the Government Department at Yale, he had been a powerful influence on some of the best students there, including Bill Buckley. Kendall prepared his lectures with great care, writing them out in full in green ink. But he was institutionally intolerable. Dwight MacDonald described him as “a wild Yale don, of extreme, eccentric, and very abstract views, who could get a conversation into the shouting stage faster than anyone within memory.”

That is at once accurate and impressionistic. Kendall’s views were anything but abstract, and, far from being extreme or eccentric, I believe they explicate the central

American political tradition. But that was the sunny side. In the academy, he did pick fights of ferocious temperature. Within days of his arrival at Yale, he had to go to one of those tame affairs where a colleague, this time the chairman of his department, delivers a small paper on something or other. When the professor finished, Kendall immediately tore what he had said to shreds. His style of argument was to force matters back to first principles where he could be devastating. The ivy must have shrivelled on the walls of that Yale building.

Before long, he was on evil terms with everyone in his department. He was a good friend and neighbor of the renowned literary critic Cleanth Brooks, but after a while he treated Brooks as an enemy too. Before long, in pure self-defense, Yale was giving Kendall every other year off with pay, so that the other members of his department might calm their nerves. He was given to understand that he would never be promoted to full professor. On one of his leaves, he phoned the President of Yale from Madrid. Drunk, he said something like this: “You sonofabitch, I know you hate my guts. Well, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. You can buy back my tenure for \$25,000.” In the 1950s, that was a lot of money. Yale telegraphed it. He was immediately taken up by Stanford. After all, his publication record was outstanding, and he was a great teacher. He was heading for tenure when a drunken driving escapade soured that university on

him. He moved on to the University of Dallas.

Kendall had also been a senior editor of *National Review* and a brilliant journalist there, but he was no longer on speaking terms with Bill Buckley, having resigned over some slight. It was said that at *National Review* he was never on speaking terms with more than one editor, and that the identity of this individual constantly changed. There is still a leather couch at *National Review*, known as "The Willmoore Kendall Memorial Couch," on which he had been surprised after hours *in flagrante* with a secretary. "Couldn't he have gone to a hotel?" Buckley wondered. While I was driving to Paris, he had two marriages going through the annulment process in Rome, a first in the history of that ancient church. A difficult man, obviously, but touched by genius. I understood that he was in Paris working on a book about Rousseau.

I managed to find his address in Meudon-Bellevue, a working-class suburb in what is known as the Communist "Red Belt" around Paris. This was not exactly a slum, but close. What answered the bell was a tall, gray-haired man in a sleeveless T-shirt, dirty khakis, and sneakers without socks. His hangover, obviously, was of cosmic proportions. He mumbled to the effect that we should meet later for dinner at a certain Greek restaurant on the Left Bank. That he would be able to show up I doubted.

He arrived transformed: shaved now, wearing a gorgeous blue-gray Harris tweed jacket and a black turtleneck. He would have been at home at Maxim's or Wimbledon. We sat at an outside table under a blue-and-white striped awning, and he chatted with the *maitre d'* in perfect French. When the waiter arrived, Kendall ordered for us from among his favorite Greek and French dishes. His work on Rousseau, he said, was going well. It was to be an edition of Rousseau's recommendations for a Polish constitution, important for majority-rule theory. He was sure, he said, that I didn't believe all that nonsense about Rousseau

from Irving Babbitt and Russell Kirk. I was working on Burke, wasn't I? And Burke and Rousseau were in important theoretical agreement. Rousseau, he thought, was a very great political theorist.

He sipped a martini. "Right over there," he said pointing, "once passed the great pilgrimages on their way to Santiago da Compostella in Spain. These pilgrimages were central events of the Middle Ages." I knew that he was a Catholic convert. He said that historically the political role of the Church was to remind the West of what it essentially is.

We enjoyed that perfect late summer evening there at that Greek restaurant. There could have been no more civilized host than Willmoore. At the University of Dallas, I learned, he had organized a very successful doctorate program that combined political theory and literature. Had I realized that Camus's novel *The Plague* was a perfect illustration of Rousseau's constitutional theory? No, I had not. I told him that I had a book going through the press at Doubleday. This was to be *The American Dissent*, an attempt to describe recent conservative thought in America. There was a chapter on Willmoore. He eagerly asked to see the galleys when they became available. I gather he wanted to see whether I had his "teaching," as he called it, right. We gossiped. He could be wicked. About Cleanth Brooks, he said, "Cleanth is always the next most conservative person in any room." About the *National Review* editor Frank Meyer and the contributor Russell Kirk, he said, "Nothing they write has anything to do with America."

Before leaving Paris, I invited Willmoore to visit me in England, and he agreed to. He would like to see his old college, Pembroke—Samuel Johnson's college. I drove back to Oxford and bore down on my work on Burke, also spending some time up at the University of Sheffield, where the major edition of Burke's massive correspondence was coming out volume after volume. I had had the idea of writing a brief critical life of Burke, but the footnotes to

the edition of his letters were so comprehensive that the biography I had in mind would have been redundant, so I concentrated on essays about one or another aspect of Burke's thought.

I lived near Oxford in a hamlet named Aston-near-Bampton, where most of the houses were cottages with thatched roofs, but what was available to me to rent was a large, draughty country house. Willmoore eventually showed up for the promised visit. He stayed for a week or more, and we spent hours discussing politics and political theory. But we both went in to Oxford every morning to work on our projects. He drank very heavily, morning and evening, starting with a "wake-up-call" whiskey at breakfast. I ceased trying to keep up with him. We met for lunch at an Oxford pub named the Turf, where he downed a few. It was a marvelous place, wedged in a sort of backyard between two Oxford colleges. Its men's room was famous for inventive graffiti: "Rupert is in love with the mannequin in Marks & Spencer's window" and a drawing of two small squares entitled "Balls, by Braque." Later there was the cocktail hour, dinner with wine, cognac, and coffee, and finally a few nightcaps. One afternoon, he had to lean against one of the Gothic walls of Balliol College, short of breath. He popped a nitro pill, and the heart seizure passed. Our alcohol intake was such, though he was miles ahead of me, that when he finally left I jogged for the first and only time in my life in order to sweat it out.

But there were marvelous moments that early winter at Oxford. The aged Master of Pembroke, who had known Willmoore years before as a young Rhodes Scholar, put on a black-tie banquet for him. This involved numerous dons and even celebrity intellectuals up from London. Willmoore himself looked regal in his evening clothes, and the toasts to him were eloquent and obviously sincere. The old master declared that the two most intelligent students he had known in his years at Oxford had been Willmoore and then-Prime Minister Harold

Wilson. Willmoore and I chose to interpret this as a compliment.

Once we had a cocktail hour or two at a pub near Oxford, where we picked up a jovial game of darts with three active-duty British paratroopers. When they understood that Willmoore was living in Paris the paratroopers were flabbergasted. "Why, mate?" Willmoore tried to explain about Rousseau. No luck. "Mate, the niggers begin at Calais." This opinion of the French was not confined to the rougher types. One of the leading English poets, who had fought in the war, once remarked to me, "It was rather a good war. But it would have been a better war if we had been fighting the French." I recalled that Robert Graves had about the same opinion in *Goodbye to All That*. Those chalk cliffs of Dover are not especially welcome to emanations from the Continent.

As the days and nights passed I received a thorough lecturing, Socratic fashion, on Willmoore's "teaching"—not "philosophy," but "teaching." That term seemed to him more "American" and modest than "philosophy." I remember sitting with him through a long afternoon at a country inn called the Rose and Crown about ten miles from Oxford. Nearby the great Thames was a small clear stream patrolled by swans: Matthew Arnold country, the neighborhood of the Scholar Gypsy. "Sweet Thames, run softly" wrote Eliot, echoing Spenser, "till I end my song,/ Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long." We sat over pints of Watney's Red Barrel, and I listened as he developed his informal lecture, asking questions and trying to lead me to the true "teaching." The only other person I have known to do this kind of thing as effectively is Milton Friedman. What I was hearing would be published posthumously in 1970 as *The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition*. As I listened to Willmoore speak, I actually sensed the presence of the clear dry light that for many of us surrounds the great founders of the American constitutional system, men such as Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, Franklin, Washington.

There was an orthodox American political tradition, Willmoore thought, and a constant challenge to “derail” it by plebiscites or newly proclaimed “rights.” The Constitution designed in Philadelphia was a virtually sacred utterance to him, and its basis was established in its very brief preamble, the most important words of which were the first three: *We the people*. Government by “we the people” has been the American goal, the gift to the world symbolized by the light the Statue of Liberty holds aloft. The preamble next sets forth six general goals of the new government. The term “rights” is never mentioned.

Everything that follows, that is, almost the entire Constitution as ratified and amended, constitutes a mechanism for achieving the six goals of the preamble. It is striking that the six goals are syntactically equal. Which of the six goals takes precedence at a given juncture depends on “discussion” by the government set forth in the Constitution. It is a “deliberate sense” theory of government, “sense” emerging through “deliberation.”

This mechanism of self-government was, as I say, sacred territory to Willmoore. He had been a man of the left until he had gone to Spain as a journalist during the civil war and had seen there a variety of ideologies alien to America, that is, to the Constitution. These included royalism, Communism, fascism, anarchism. His understanding was that the ratified Constitution represented a permanent agreement on the orthodox American form of representative government.

This line of argument was one of the things that got him into trouble with his liberal colleagues at Yale, into those “shouting matches.” For in the liberal “open society,” everything is always up for grabs. While I do not think Willmoore would have denied a Marxist or a fascist a podium or a classroom, I am sure he would deny that he had any “right” to one. But, he would have hungered to debate him. The “alien” teaching privilege would have been bestowed only prudentially. It would also follow that

the Confederacy was guilty of treason. It had signed on to “a more perfect union.”

And he considered all talk about “rights” to be vulgar political theory and dangerous. The word appears nowhere in the Constitution. The so-called Bill of Rights concerns only matters of procedure. “Rights” are dangerous because they undercut government by discussion and superior considerations of prudence. Government by “deliberate consent” he traced back to the first American assembly, in the main cabin of the Mayflower, as it lay off the coast of Massachusetts in 1620. The “Mayflower Compact” was the product of our first “deliberative assembly.”

Of course for him the Declaration of Independence was the pons asinorum of political theory and had to be approached with care. It was essentially a declaration of war, its “rights” language angled toward French opinion. There is no “right” to life or liberty: ask the conscripted, jailed, or condemned man. And the “all men are created equal” clause is more mischievous. Men may be equal at birth, but from the first moments differentiation sets in. They are also equal at death, but that has no constitutional significance. Equality? Willmoore noted that in the long list of indictments against George III which concludes the Declaration, Jefferson did not speak of the Indian tribes as equals of the colonists. He described them as “merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.” The only other time “equal” is used in the Declaration, he pointed out, it has to do with the “separate and equal station” which the Declaration is demanding for the colonies, in the process of bidding for independence, an “equal” place “among the powers of the earth.” That is, among the civilized nations, most especially Great Britain. Englishmen have no natural right to govern Americans.

Willmoore also said that the Constitution set forth a system of legislative supremacy. He ridiculed the conventional idea that we have “separate and equal branches.” The

Congress can impeach and remove presidents and judges, it can refuse to fund the executive or the judiciary, and it can remove any matter from the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court: Article III, Section II, Clause 2. Congress when aroused is an eight-hundred-pound gorilla. The executive and the judiciary have no comparable powers against the legislature.

A collision does not occur because the executive and the judiciary do not “push matters too far,” as he put it. He held that *The Federalist Papers* set forth a morality of restraint under which the system can function. But he struggled with “We the people.” If the people are the final determinant of government by discussion, suppose the people massively err? As Macaulay said, the Constitution is all sail and no anchor. Willmoore’s anchor was “the virtuous people.” By “virtue” here he meant an ingrained sense of limits and a careful attention to Constitutional morality and the restraint that allowed the goals of the preamble to be assessed and achieved through discussion. This, he thought, was subject to “derailment” by far-fetched interpretations of the Constitution and by insistence on “rights,” which put an end to discussion. He thought that he found a theoretical basis for his idea of the “virtuous people” in the work of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, who sought paradigms of order rooted in human nature.

It was a very fine experience to listen to this discourse as the pints of English beer went down. In his published work, Willmoore had been working towards his final “teaching.” He had been a great political theorist and also a lethal polemicist, and along with that a great and original prose stylist. His sentences are prose models of his high political theory. Their syntax is complex, with much use of subordinate clauses for distinction-making, but into this Jamesian syntactical structure he weaves colloquialisms and slang locutions, refer-

ences to athletics and folk expressions, all of this representing “We the people.”

I was and remain very much in debt to Willmoore for his conversation and his writings. I think his “deliberate sense” account of the American political tradition is correct, plainly set forth by our eighteenth-century founders but also reaching back in time to centuries of English experience and common law.

I associate Willmoore’s “teaching” with the sceptical tradition in politics, the tradition I most admire. It includes such names as Montaigne, Montesquieu, Hume, Samuel Johnson, Burke, the American Federalists, Lincoln, and maybe Oakeshott. Its ideal figure knows too much to be a relativist but too little to be an absolutist. Human imperfection makes representative government necessary, government by discussion and consensus.

It was in 1966, I think, that Willmoore stimulated an offer to me of a post at the University of Dallas. I was to join him in teaching his Ph.D. program in Literature and Politics. Though I admired many on the faculty in Dallas, especially the critic M. E. Bradford and the philosopher Frederick Wilhelmsen, I was not inclined to give up my post at Dartmouth, where I was more than content, so I declined.

Not long after this, I received a note from Willmoore. It was written in green ink on several small sheets from a desk memo pad. He was very angry. He said I was “as corrupt as Buckley,” who happened to be visiting me at the time. I passed the little sheets over to him, and he was sadly amused. As Yogi Berra once said, it was *déjà vu* all over again.

On June 30, 1967, Willmoore spent an ordinary academic day. He had picked up his mail and talked to a student about a term paper. He had lunch at home and lay down to take a nap from which he did not awaken. He was fifty-eight.

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